

A POT OF BASIL

by
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FOR DIANA

I

November

SOME afternoons in late November are listlessly full of the anticipated twilight, or dim with a ghost of twilight that never seems to materialise. Empty of brightness, the day is still not sufficiently gloomy, so that one waits until one can decently switch on lamps and start the evening rather as one waits on a cold station for a delayed train.

Margaret Goodwin switched on the light in her dressing-room because she was about to tidy her mantelshelf, and this far side of the room was genuinely shadowy. She had come upstairs to lay out the grey velvet dress she intended to wear this evening. Finding that the worrying gin stain on the skirt had disappeared of its own accord, she hung the dress on the outside of her wardrobe door and went on to lay out her pearls, her stockings and slippers. After that, indolent in this lingering afternoon, but mentally preoccupied, she pottered about, tidying things. The mantelshelf was littered with envelopes, scissors, cotton reels; the photographs had been pushed askew to accommodate the litter. Margaret diligently removed every intruding object, placing many of these in such a way that she would subsequently have to tidy the dressing-table and window-sills. She was thinking about tonight's dinner, about family excitements, and about what claim Edward the Fourth could possibly have had to the English throne. Roast chicken, her daughters, and Richard Earl of Cambridge—or was it Duke of York?—chased each other through her mind.

Now that the light was on, she felt brisker. She straightened the photograph of her children, and paused for a moment to study it. This had been taken ten years ago; they must then have been aged twelve, seven, and three. They seemed in the picture to be each at a very different stage of growth, but the photographer's touch had made all their faces alike: eyes rounded and starry, features and hair swimming in a haze of dewiness. I never had another taken of them all together, thought Margaret; I always meant to. . . . Turning away and sweeping a pile of clean handkerchiefs into a drawer, she decided that Edmund Mortimer came into the Yorkist claim somewhere. Also that Kitty would have forgotten to take the chickens out of the refrigerator to thaw before roasting. And that this was a very muggy and interminable afternoon; the sky outside should have glowed blue in answer to the electric light, but it hadn't; it was still dish-water-grey. "The long day wanes . . ." she said aloud, pointlessly; adding to herself that she must find something useful to do; she was just fidgeting.

The house seemed quiet, although there were noises: from the kitchen below, a clatter of crockery, and from a bedroom on the floor above, 'Music While You Work', offering its afternoon period of encouragement on a radio not tuned accurately to the wavelength, so that it sounded as if Syd Dean and his band had rejected their usual instruments in favour of combs-and-paper. Margaret, becoming aware of this with her refreshed energy, frowned, and moved to the door to call up some remonstrance. At the same moment the telephone rang downstairs, and Kitty scuttled to answer it. Margaret waited in her doorway to listen as Kitty gave this number in her parlour-maid-voice; as she relapsed into: "Oh, it's *you* . . ." Margaret turned away, but Kitty added: "Oh good . . . righto!" and hung up expeditiously. She came to the foot of the stairs and seeing her mistress, did

not advance farther, but leaned on the newel post to announce:

"Mrs Briggs'll be in tomorrow. Thank the Lord."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Margaret. "She's better, then?"

"Well she didn't want to admit it, but I daresay she must be. So that'll be the stairs and kitchen cupboards for her, and I'll get on with the usual."

"Yes, that will do." Margaret could not have explained at the moment what Kitty's 'usual' might be for a Saturday; but she presumed that Kitty knew. Kitty was moving away when Margaret called:

"Did you remember to take the——" Upstairs, a complicated rattling crash sounded; it might have been made by a drawer full of golf balls falling out of a chest. Margaret glanced upwards in mild alarm but finished her question after a slight pause: "——chickens out of the fridge?"

"Ooh——" Kitty's flight was answer to that. Margaret called up the stairs:

"Nicola, what *are* you doing?"

A door that had been ajar was flung wider, and pink light from the table-lamp poured on to the stairs. Margaret's eldest daughter poured on to the stairs too, descending half-way with a speed that no one who was not drunk or in love would have attempted or survived. She checked herself as one of her feathered mules flew off, and clung to the banister, leaning over. One of her hands grasped a bunch of stockings that fluffed out over the rail like dust raised by her abrupt braking.

"I was just going to wash some s-s . . ." She stuttered on the word, gave it up, and looked down at her mother, her face beaming into a smile of sparkling radiance. Margaret smiled back. They laughed at each other, as if sharing some exquisite joke. Nicola's cheeks went pink and she gurgled happily, bending for her lost slipper.

"You'll be sick if you don't calm down a bit," said Margaret, in amused exasperation.

"Oh, I will, really I will."

"What time is Aubrey coming? Did you tell him a time?"

"Well I said for drinks, I said we had dinner at half-past seven, I expect he'll know. . . . Is that all right?"

"Is what all right?" repeated Margaret, confused. But she saw that there was no getting sense out of Nicola at the moment, so added without waiting: "I must see that those two put on something respectable."

"Oh, Aubrey's met them, he won't mind. It isn't really a party, you know, is it? I thought I'd wear my spotty silk." She went upstairs again and hurried along to the bathroom. Margaret called after her:

"Nico, do tune that radio . . ." But taps were running; she gave it up and went down to the drawing-room to wait for tea.

The radio rasped on unheard as Nicola half-filled the basin with warm water, and shook soap-flakes from a packet. They slid out silkily, rectangular dehydrated bubbles, and turned into real bubbles as she frisked the water with her hands. The water was milky-blue and the bubbles, clouding upon each other round her wrists, buoyant with rainbows. That, reflected Nicola, is what *I* feel like.

She paused, leaning on her hands, staring at herself in the mirror above the basin. Yes, she pursued. That's exactly what I felt like last night. One moment I was a soap-flake, and the next I was a bubble. It's funny. It's more than funny, it's incredible. Because, who would have thought that just one moment like that could make everything quite different? Or make me quite different? It was like . . . like popping up to the surface of the sea; breaking through into a new element. But I don't really see why. I thought Aubrey wanted to marry me, and I

thought I would like that, and I decided that if he'd ask me I should say yes. I rehearsed it. I planned how it might happen. I planned all sorts of things—where we might live, and what kind of a wedding-dress . . . and it all seemed a good idea. . . . Then, even last night, I had a *feeling* that he was going to ask me. I don't know why; just the way he pinned on that orchid when he came to collect me. . . . He looked—serious. And I knew, really I knew, that he was going to ask me after that samba when he said: "Come out on the balcony for a moment." So I thought, here it goes; and here it went. And he didn't say the things I'd planned for him—he sounded rather harassed and . . . Oh, well, I suppose I was beginning to feel odd, I didn't really listen. Only I heard myself say, "Yes," in a little squeaky voice. And then . . . everything was different. . . .

The same sense of 'difference' struck her again as she recalled this, and she whisked up the water on a sudden impulse of excitement. Plunging the stockings into the basin, she waited as the water seeped through them against her hands, and stared into the mirror, studying her face absently. She looked rather like the photograph in her mother's dressing-room; there was a kind of dewiness, an aura about her. Her cheeks glowed downily, her eyes were mistily widened; even her hair looked fluffier than usual. I *look* different, she noted, not displeased, but a little startled. She was in fact, in spite of her intent scrutiny, much less conscious than usual of her own appearance. It was not her own judgement that mattered any more. A rather full-moon shape of face, hair that wasn't golden enough except when it had just been washed, eyes that were blue only when she wore blue—these blemishes were no longer anxieties. Aubrey liked her face, so her face satisfied her—or rather, she need not complain of it.

She forgot the stockings, as she mused on. It *was* so funny. She had never imagined anything like this. Not a

year ago, Colin Richardson had proposed to her; and she had said with composure that she didn't think they would suit each other. . . . It must have been some kind of intuition, she decided, because she had thought she loved him, till that moment. But she hadn't really. Heavens, no. She had never known how to love anybody until now.

It was funny, too, that she hadn't been frightfully impressed by Aubrey when she first met him. He was tall and dark and danced well, of course, but he'd been just a friend of John's. For a while. Well, until last night, he had only been just a person. But now . . . Now he had come to life. He had come true.

Everything had been muddled somehow. She had planned, too, how she would tell the family that she was engaged. But last night they had all been in bed when she came home; and this morning she had to oversleep. This morning, of all days. She had not woken up till half-past eight, when her sisters and father were almost due to leave the house. In panic lest they might have to wait a whole day before hearing this astounding news, she had hurled herself out of bed and down to the dining-room, her hair on end, her dressing-gown streaming behind her. When she burst open the door and saw them all sitting just as usual, having breakfast, reading letters and stirring coffee in the mechanical docility of a glum morning, Nicola had been dumbfounded. She stood in the doorway speechless while they turned to look at her. Finally, she had stuttered out: "W-what do you think . . .?" and then begun to giggle.

Daddy blinked at her, puzzled; Mummy was a little alarmed; Philippa said in dismay: "What's the matter?" It was Annabel who gave her sister a long measuring look and then asked kindly:

"Are you going to marry Aubrey?"

"Yes!" gasped Nicola. "How did you know . . .?" It

must have been a lucky guess; Annabel looked as astonished as anyone. Only, they couldn't really have been astonished. She'd been going out with Aubrey for so long, and so often, and hadn't made any effort to think about getting a new job—she had been 'staying at home for a bit' with no ostensible purpose. . . . Perhaps, she now realised, she had infected them with something of her own astonishment with the situation. At any rate, they had all gazed at her as if they had never seen her before, as she stood there drawing the sash of her dressing-gown tighter, and blushing and laughing. . . . Then she ran to Mummy and kissed her and hung round her neck imploring: "Are you pleased? Do say you're pleased . . ." and Mummy laughed too, and said: "Darling, of course I'm delighted, but just let me take it in——" and Daddy said: "What's all this? Who's getting married? Nobody tells me anything——" and Philippa, who never saw when Daddy was being jocular, started to explain to him that Aubrey was the dark one who worked in the City somewhere and had come to Daddy's own Silver Wedding party last month, didn't he remember. . . . Daddy told her to pass him the marmalade, and Nicola went round to him and kissed him too, and explained that Aubrey was going to ring him up at the office this morning and make an appointment to ask him for her properly, and anyway—— Daddy interrupted to say that that was very obliging of the young man, and Mummy interrupted Daddy to say that Aubrey had better come to dinner tonight and meet the family, and that, by the way, it was time the others were off to school.

Nicola wondered now what Annabel and Philippa had made of the incident. She hadn't remembered to look at them. After all, Aubrey was going to be their brother, in a way; it would be just as well if they liked him. As far as Nicola knew, they did; but she vaguely expected that they, too, would see Aubrey through different eyes from

now on. It was important to her that everyone else should see him as perfect; that everyone else should share in this enhancement of life. . . .

Mummy called up the stairs, through the voice of Mrs Dale, which, fruitier than ever because of the inaccurate tuning, was now issuing from the radio.

“Nicola! Tea?”

“Oh, yes. Thanks. I’m just coming.” She wrung the stockings through the tepid suds. Tea-time; the afternoon officially ended; evening approaching, and Aubrey, and family dinner. . . . I do wonder, Nicola thought, watching the water drain from the basin, what they will all really think of each other. I wonder what the others have been thinking, all day. I wonder if they’re pleased. Not that it makes much difference to me. . . .

A Friday afternoon in late November is not a joyful time for schoolteachers. Naturally, everyone wants to slack off a little in anticipation of the week-end; but when this period of slackening always coincides with the Upper Fourth’s only period of chemistry lesson it is rather hard on the budding Pasteurs of the Upper Fourth. So Heather Barlow had flogged herself and the class diligently through an experiment, deductions therefrom, writing up thereof in notebooks. Now, having issued the command: “Tidy up!” she allowed herself to relax slightly. She wandered to the back of the room and leaned on a radiator, longing for a cigarette and gazing inattentively at her pupils.

“Jennifer, I think we might have the other lights on, please.” Jennifer flew to the switches, and the room brightened and shrank. Rushing of tap-water and clatter of apparatus sounded more distinctly, in sympathy; voices rose a little, green overalls jostled to and fro. Heather, patting her palms against the hot metal of the radiator, thought: Leaning on here will make great gouges down my skirt. But she was too idle to move. She stared at the

distant blackboard, on which, in a fit of pique half an hour ago, she had made Ann Reeves inscribe ten times the statement: 'Chlorine Is Monovalent.' Studying the ten-fold assertion made Heather suddenly wonder whether it was true.

Upper Fourth; what a gang to have at this time of the week. In her six years at the school Heather had come to call this form the Age of Romance. It was funny; children who were quite cheerfully friendly in Lower Four had a way of turning into doe-eyed half-wits during this year; then, in the Lower Fifth, they resumed their cheerful friendliness—in fortunate cases.

Teaching an Upper Fourth had, almost always, an atmosphere that was both irritating and stimulating. It was infuriating to see in a girl's eyes that expression that meant only: Miss Barlow is speaking, whereas it should have meant: Miss Barlow tells us that chlorine is monovalent. Yet, in a way, it was refreshing, this theatricalness. One couldn't help playing up, unconsciously, to an audience that responded so willingly; stepping up to the demonstration bench and lifting a flask, one felt like Margot Fonteyn gliding on to the stage. One moved like royalty; every syllable noted, every handkerchief significant; and there was a power behind it. Silly as they were these children were discovering within themselves the power of glamourising things. And in Heather's opinion it was a power worth cultivating; it was imagination and ultimately self-possession. She was quite aware that the personal affection the smitten pupils felt for her was a variable quantity, but she felt responsible nevertheless. There was something she could help them to do: to see, perhaps, that whereas they were unlikely to have the chance (she hoped) of dragging her from a burning building, they might all the same show the same spirit by washing up their flasks properly and applying themselves intelligently to the study of chemistry. To harness their

romantic impulses; what an idea, pondered Heather, watching Janys Martin trying to put a glass stopper in a bottle obviously much too small for it. What an idea. But worth it, for them, if . . .

"Miss Barlow, why has ours gone such a funny colour?" asked Pat Barr, holding up a flask of muggy-looking liquid.

"Because you poured ink into it," replied Heather pleasantly. She was glad that she had seen them doing this and had reserved her fire; their abashed expressions gratified her. They waited for her further comment, but she said nothing until they had relinquished the hope of notoriety and turned back to their tidying up. Then she added mildly: "You will each put a penny in the Break-ages Box as a fine for wasting school property."

"Oh, Miss *Barlow* . . ." the trio of culprits wailed. But Heather had moved away to the front of the room again. She began to put away her own books and apparatus, at which a dozen eager helpers rushed forward.

"Thank you; Jennifer and Pauline. That will be enough." She drove the others away and, searching for chalk, wrote on the blackboard the homework for the week. There were a few more wails at the amount set, but these she ignored. Five minutes to go; five minutes to a cup of staff-room tea. And, she was determined, the laboratory should be cleared up in time for that. . . . She saw a figure leaning against the window, staring out, flagrantly unoccupied; one hand clutching a test-tube, the other the window sash. Philippa Goodwin, who seemed to be going through the silliest possible of silly phases. But Heather spoke to her unrepvingly. "Come on, Philippa. Don't moon."

Philippa started and turned. "Oh—I'm sorry. I was thinking." Her luminous grey eyes, lifted quickly, seemed to cling to Heather's for a moment. In the window recess she was shadowed from the electric light, and her thin

fairness made her insubstantial against the early dusk. Heather paused beside her, asking on an impulse:

"Trouble?"

"Oh, no." She shook her head. Then with an air of confidence she said: "My sister has just got engaged."

"Annabel?"

"No." Philippa laughed. "No; Nicola. She's the eldest."

"Oh, of course; I remember Nicola. She was Netball Captain when I first came here; I never taught her. Are you pleased about it?"

"Oh, yes," said Philippa vigorously. Again, for a moment, she glanced at Heather with an unconscious anxiety. Heather said:

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-two." She hesitated, then asked diffidently: "Is that rather young to be married?"

"No, I don't think so." Heather was puzzled; she went on with a smile: "I got engaged when I was eighteen, myself."

"Did you?" Philippa seemed to accept that information without curiosity; she looked thoughtfully down at her test-tube. Heather said quickly: "I'm sure she will be very happy. Do you know her fiancé?"

"Yes. He's very nice." This was said with sincerity; but there was still some perplexity on Philippa's face. She made a sudden restless movement, and Heather, roused by it, said:

"Well; it's nearly time for the bell." She strolled back to her bench and sat with folded arms, looking out over the class again with a new train of thought in her mind.

Of course, she mused, I try not to discriminate between the children—personally speaking. At least, what I mean is that I don't on the whole need to discriminate; I expect I'm as cold-hearted as a fish; I wonder if I should drag any of these out of a burning building . . . ? But, it's an age-old

problem; like all age-old problems, it's new every time it crops up. Here are we, poor mugs of teachers, trying—in addition to everything else—to teach children how to live independently of special personal affection; because they are supposed to get that at home. I wonder if they do. . . . And we are supposed to deal impartially with the whole crowd. Well, they must adjust themselves sooner or later to life in the Wide World, so we do our best. You'd think their parents would be grateful. But oh, no, the mothers come to the Parents' Parties accusing us right and left of not paying enough individual attention to their little darlings; Lord, how many times has one heard that phrase: "She's so highly strung." . . . Damn it, who isn't. And petting them doesn't cure that. . . . But it's what all these mothers seem to want; they want us to be a proxy-mama to each pupil; I wonder if they'd feel the same if they each had about two hundred daughters. . . . I wonder if I would feel as they do, if I had even one daughter? Am I really a desiccated spinster, as these mothers always hint? Because just sometimes one *can* see what it would be like to have one of them for one's own. . . .

She glanced across at Philippa Goodwin again. Philippa was busily swabbing a bench with a wet duster, listening to something that another girl was whispering. Supposing, thought Heather suddenly, that I'd said what I did about getting engaged to Pat Barr, for instance; it would be all round the form in half an hour. But Philippa just wasn't interested—in that sense. I like that child. She is looking droopy nowadays; I wonder what really is the matter. Perhaps there has been something amiss at home, possibly about this engagement of Nicola's? I don't remember Nicola at all clearly; I believe she was more like Annabel than like Philippa. Philippa isn't like the others; much more unsure of herself and, I feel in a way, rather more worth while. Or is that just favouritism. . . . Unspeakable word. I wonder what Mrs Goodwin is like? I ought to

remember her; I must have met her at these Parents' Parties; but one meets so *many* . . .

The Upper Fourth gave a unanimous scraping start, and fell into silence. Heather looked up, to see that the door had opened to admit Miss Pearce, the Deputy Head. Miss Pearce waved a hand imperiously at the class, to signify that she had nothing to say to it, and approached the demonstration bench.

"Excuse me. . . . Listen, Barlow, did you know that the Old Girls' Reception had been changed from the fifteenth to the fourteenth?"

"Yes; I thought it was on the fourteenth in the first place?"

"Well, no, the date was altered, but I thought everyone knew. Now it turns out that no one ever altered the notice in the lower Staff Cloakroom, and Turnbull has been complaining . . ." Heather grinned involuntarily. Miss Pearce smiled slightly; staff-room etiquette permitted neither of them to observe that Miss Turnbull's complaining was as regular as her breath. ". . . so I've been rushing round the building to make sure that no one else was uninformed on the matter," resumed Miss Pearce. "I wanted to get home early . . ."

She lingered for a moment nevertheless, looking at the class. The children were intently and soberly employed, quite aware that they were being watched, and liking it. Miss Pearce said:

"Upper Four, isn't it? . . . Not a bad lot."

"No. Do you teach them?"

"They came to me this term. They had Smith last year. I find them pleasant—though of course, it's a silly age."

"Yes, I've just been reflecting on that. . . . Who are your Little Favourites in this bunch?" Pronounced with capital letters, favouritism was a permissible joke.

"Oh, Gwendo Davies; she has a remarkably acute mind; she wrote an essay on Browning last week that shook me.

And Barbara Morris, of course. She has read the whole of the Koran, purely for her own amusement."

"Yes; but I wasn't thinking of it quite like that; which of them would you have for a daughter?"

"Ah. That's different," said Miss Pearce at once. She smiled, humouring this whim of Heather's, but glancing round the room shrewdly.

"It is different, isn't it?" Heather agreed.

"Let me see. . . ." She pushed her spectacles up the bridge of her nose. "Well, perhaps Ann Reeves; Philippa Goodwin; Mary Ashe . . ."

"How funny; I think I should say just the same. What is it that makes some people like that?"

"Like what?" Miss Pearce glanced quickly at her junior.

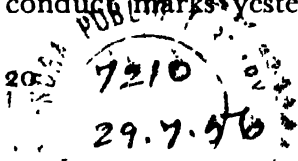
"I don't know," said Heather vaguely. "One might almost say, lovable. But of course it's only a coincidence that you mentioned the three that I might have chosen. . . ." She leaned her chin on her hand. Pat Barr, peeping at her from the back of the room, hissed to her friend that old Pearce must be giving Miss Barlow a ticking-off.

"We might canvass the matter at a Staff Meeting," suggested Miss Pearce briskly, twinkling down at her. "You look as if you need a cup of tea."

"Oh, I do. . . . Really, though; I wonder if I'm getting to a dangerous age. Perhaps suffering a last attack of human sympathy before settling down into a waspish old schoolma'am. . . ." She realised that this remark was not outstandingly tactful.

But Miss Pearce was amused. "I'm glad you take your career so seriously."

"Well, it rather feels as if I don't. I'm going to turn into one of these creatures about whom people say: What a pity she never married. . . . Oh, Lord, I meant to tell you: I gave two of your form conduct marks yesterday for shrieking on the stairs."



"Thank you. That makes us twelve this week, I think; we seem to be having a bad term. . . . Are you doing anything exciting this week-end?"

She certainly isn't a wasp, thought Heather gratefully as she answered. She's an old frump and a pearl and a great dear, and I shouldn't in the least mind turning out like her, only I haven't her guts. She's really saying, Forget it all, my dear, and run off home and have a good time; which is an excellent idea.

The bell rang. Upper Four scabbled into lines behind the benches and looked expectant.

The bell rang, just in time to save Miss Bryce from venturing on to new and unprepared ground. She seemed to have torn through the lesson faster than she intended; for the last ten minutes she had been stalling, repeating herself, chattering. Economic history happened to be a branch of her subject that she had never liked. Nor did she like teaching Sixth formers. In particular, she did not like Gillian Cohen.

Nora Bryce was still only in her first term's teaching. She had spent a strenuous three years at her university, intent on gaining a degree. Now that she had the degree, she was dismayed to find that the subjects she had studied for it were not behind her. There was a tiredness in her mind; Adam Smith, the laissez-fair-godmother of today's lesson, affected her rather as washing that has fallen from a broken line affects the housewife who has to pick it up again from the mud. But, today's lesson had passed. Now there was a cup of tea, and hooray, the week-end. In the encouragement of this recollection, she flung out a gratuitous sentence as she gathered her books together; a sentence that tacked itself loosely on "what she had just been saying, and ended loosely with: ". . . and Bentham, and people like that."

"Bentham?" asked Gillian Cohen alertly. Neither of

the two pupils had moved, or touched their books. Oh, blow her, thought Nora impatiently. Now what have I started? . . . She didn't like Gillian Cohen. In the stuffy air of the little coaching-room, and in the toils of Adam Smith, she still remained needle-minded and what Nora privately called 'supercilious'. Annabel Goodwin was just as bad, really; but she didn't put on those awful expressions. While Gillian's mobile Jewish features were showing mild surprise (which looked to Nora like disdain) or contradiction discreetly withheld (which looked to Nora like fiendish glee), Annabel's expression was always calm. In fact, to Nora's touchy pride, Annabel was a bit too aloof. She was probably thinking, too, what a fool the new history mistress was. . . .

Nora made some random answer, and stood up. The girls rose too, politely. Annabel moved to open the door.

"But surely, Bentham was a follower of Helvetius?" persisted Gillian. "Didn't you hear those lectures on the Third Programme? . . ."

"No, I did not," snapped Nora. She didn't intend to be told by a child to listen to the Third Programme. And she hated people who showed off. But, in her first term of teaching, Nora still held to the preconception that teachers ought to know more than their pupils; similarly, that the teacher should have the last word. In search of this word she hesitated, cradling her books on her arm, staring down at the table. The three of them, mistress and two prefects, looked about the same age. The prefects, in their white blouses, courteously attentive, seemed in command of the situation, more poised and better groomed. Nora thought: I must take these two down a peg, somehow. I can't teach them if they are going to keep on like this. After all, they're only schoolgirls.

"Well," she said abruptly, "good afternoon." The last word had not presented itself. She felt herself blushing as

she hurried down the corridor. Now, they would be telling each other what a fool . . .

She would perhaps have felt slighted had she known that Gillian and Annabel did not once refer to her.

Gillian, screwing the cap on her fountain pen, observed: "I suppose Helvetius was *the* founder of utilitarianism?"

And Annabel, stretching her arms, murmured: "Was he? I had an idea it was John Stuart Mill."

Gillian's eyebrows flew up with an emphasis that would have cowed Nora immediately. "Oh, no," she said, shocked.

"When a clue in a crossword puzzle mentions an economist, they always mean Mill," said Annabel aimlessly. She looked out of the window. "What a dismal day it has been. Did I tell you—Nicola's got herself engaged?"

"No, you didn't tell me, but June did. Congratulations to her. Is he nice?"

"Yes, seems quite suitable. I've only met him twice, of course." She smoothed back her hair, and laughed as she remembered: "Nico's all in a froth; she came rushing down to tell us at breakfast, giggling like a lunatic."

"'Cupid all armed'," said Gillian. "I hope she'll be really happy."

"Well, she certainly is at the moment. I've just thought—I suppose Philippa and I might be bridesmaids?"

"It would be a likely choice. When are they to be married?"

"I don't know. No one knows much about it, yet. He's coming to dinner tonight. . . . What day is it?"

"Friday."

"Oh, hell. Junior Cloakroom. . . . Shove those in the library for me, will you, duckie?" She thrust her books at Gillian and went purposefully down to her cloakroom duty.

There was a rule of silence in all cloakrooms; as the juniors scurried in, changed into outdoor clothes and scurried out again, there was no sound except for rustles

and clattering shoes and repeated utterances of: "Good afternoon, Annabel." Juniors hurried past her, hats over their eyes and satchels swinging; Annabel, standing erect by the doorway, answered each one by name, with barely a glance. "Good afternoon, Shirley . . . good afternoon, Eileen . . ." There was no need to say anything else, not even an occasional "Don't talk please". Juniors did not talk when Annabel was on duty.

Philippa came in, with Jennifer Vane. Annabel watched her speculatively for a moment. How the child does grow, she thought, a little worried; worried not by Philippa's height, but by the slight lassitude of her bearing, and the uncertainty of her thin fingers as they struggled with shoe-laces. She's getting to what they call the Awkward Age, I suppose; she's changing. She doesn't tell us things, any more; even Mummy—as far as I know. Well, I suppose I didn't at that age, either. But Philippa is awfully like Mummy; you'd think she—

"Good afternoon, Annabel," said Philippa, in the same tone as the others, but with eyes averted; Annabel could remember saying: "Good afternoon, Nicola" in just that tone, five years ago. She answered:

"Good afternoon, Philippa," and then, looking about, called impatiently: "Hurry up, the rest of you."

The cloakroom emptied. Annabel searched desultorily for Lost Property, found a gym shoe and a French grammar, and carried these to the cupboard outside the staff-room. No one hurried the staff out of the building when school was over; from the open door came voices, laughter, clinking of cups, cigarette smoke. No one hurried the Upper Sixth out of the building, either. In their library several of them were still gathered round the radiators, the *Daily Telegraph*, and a game of vingt-et-un.

Corinne Baker looked up from her cards as Annabel came in. "I say, what's all this about Nicola being engaged? You never told me. I had it from June."

"I haven't seen you all day. Yes, she's engaged all right."

"I think it's marvellous," put in June, the banker. "I've been telling everybody. . . . Corinne, what d'you want?"

"Oh . . . wait a moment. . . . Twist."

Annabel leaned on the back of Corinne's chair. Ace, five, four. . . . She ought to stick on twenty. Annabel moved round to see what the others held.

"Who is it? Aubrey?" asked Corinne.

"Yes. I rather expected it."

"Twist . . . twist . . . five and under, thank you. How old is he?"

"I think he's twenty-seven."

"That's a good age; five years older than she. Well, I'm sorry, June dear, you shouldn't have doubled the stakes."

"What would *you* do if you held an ace? . . . It's no good, you've bust the bank. I'll have to pay you out of the hockey subscriptions."

"June!" protested Elizabeth, alarmed. "I think it's time this game stopped."

Corinne laughed and skimmed her cards into the middle of the table. "I must go, anyway. Annabel, do you remember you're coming to tea with me?"

"Oh. . . . I wonder if I'd better go straight home; Aubrey's coming to dinner."

"Is he?" said June. "I wish I could see him. I'm interested in this engagement; I was batty on Nicola for a whole year when I was in Lower Three."

"I'll borrow a photograph to show you—if there is one."

"Yes, do come," maintained Corinne. "You needn't stay, but I want you to see my patchwork now it's finished."

"Is it really finished? All right. Cri - come on."

"Eightpence halfpenny I started with," announced Corinne, scrabbling with coins. "I'll let you off the rest."

"Gambling debts are debts of honour," said Gillian

sententiously, from the window. "You ought to let June suffer for her mistakes; this is meant to be an educational institution, after all."

"Huh. All right, Annabel, I'm coming. Did somebody say there was a Prefects' Meeting before Prayers on Monday?"

"The notice has been up on the board for three days," pointed out Annabel patiently. "Gill, I'm taking Lecky for the week-end. Is that all right?" She crammed books into her attaché-case and, with an automatic glance at the notice board, added: "Good-bye, everybody," and went out of the room, followed by Corinne.

They left the building and found themselves in a dank, quiet afternoon that had still not dwindled into evening. It always seemed on coming out of school, even after being there for only seven hours, as if one stepped into a different world. The blank brown façades of the school buildings, inscrutable from the roadway, concealed some enthralling and mysterious activity that one had to be inside to understand. Looking back at the windows as she walked away, Annabel often felt rather as if she had come down to the auditorium of a theatre; she might almost have asked: What goes on behind there?

At their age, Annabel and Corinne stood between two worlds. Even in their unflatteringly-cut felt hats with striped bands, they were not, as they swung along the pavement, merely schoolgirls let out for the day. Nor, whatever Miss Bryce might feel, were they, re-entering the building each morning, merely young ladies who still happened to have a few tiresome examinations to pass. They both glanced back mechanically as they turned the corner of the road, as if to make sure that the school was tidily in the right place for the week-end. They felt a certain responsibility for it, as prefects. Corinne said: "You'd never think the whole roof of the gym was once blown off, would you?" and they admired for a moment

the gleaming slates that had replaced war-time damage. Both Annabel and Corinne had been in their prams when that bomb fell. Nevertheless, they took a proprietary pride in the school's survival of the war. Annabel said: "This district didn't suffer much, really. . . . There goes little Bryce."

Ahead of them, Nora Bryce was walking up the road with the walk that she had unconsciously cultivated during these weeks in the school. Her handbag under her arm, gripped as if it were a couple of books, she strode buoyantly, with resolution, her head lowered; the expression of her back said: You may not notice me, but I *am* someone important. She was hatless, and her tweed coat showed an uneven line of grey skirt under the hem.

"She isn't stopping at the bus stop; cheers," said Corinne. Had Miss Bryce been travelling in their direction heavy conversation would have been obligatory.

"How's she shaping?" Corinne added, halting herself at the bus stop and dumping her case of books.

"All right, I think. But she always has to be so much on the defensive. It makes her a bit of a bore."

"Well, she's young," said Corinne tolerantly. "She was on First Dinner today, having a wonderful shindy with some of those beastly little Thirds—Antonia Jacobs and Co. Something about second helpings—"

"Those Thirds are all right if you show them you mean what you say," said Annabel calmly. "But First Dinner on Fridays is always pandemonium because of the hockey people going early. . . . Here's a bus. Let's go upstairs, shall we?"

The bus ground along the damp road, a red beacon in the prevailing grey, and bore them away from this back-water of the suburb, through its shopping centre, and away again into tree-lined residentialism. This was in any case Annabel's way home; she and Corinne lived within easy walking distance of each other. When they had alighted

from the bus she hesitated again, wondering whether she ought not to go straight home. But she could not see why she hesitated; dinner was not till half-past seven; it was just that she had an unsettled feeling. She wanted to see Nicola again and make sure that it was really true. Breakfast-time in November is not the best time to receive startling news; one is not really awake; later in the day it begins to merge into last night's dreams. All the same, she knew that the news was true, and, moreover, she had not been wholly surprised by it. What she wanted, perhaps, was to see Nicola again, to study anew this new sister, and to find out whether that extraordinary mood of the morning would now have passed away, or whether it might be a permanency. Annabel had a feeling that it might be. She was vaguely concerned.

But half an hour could make no difference. She went with Corinne. This patchwork ought to be worth a visit; Corinne had been toiling at it for eight years, on and off, and now it was to be bestowed on Grandmother, whose birthday was tomorrow; Corinne explained this as they approached her house. "... and I'm going over to see her, and I must take it; but I'd like you to see it first. It's hideous, with the green backing and border. I wish I'd used red, after all. But anyway, Terry bet me ten shillings I'd never finish it, so I've collected that off him."

Corinne's father was a dentist. This gave a rather uneasy glamour to a visit to her house; from the front gate one could see the window with those four ominous frosted lamps, and the hallway smelt faintly of peril. It was even possible, sometimes, to hear the wicked sizzle of the drill as one passed the surgery door. Today, the girls avoided the front door and its brass plate, and went round to the back and into the kitchen.

They were talking again about Nicola. "I always had a feeling she'd marry young," remarked Corinne.

"So did I, I think. She's never seemed to take her work

seriously—well, you know, she rather saw it as a time-killer.”

“Actually I thought she might marry that chap with the teeth—Colin, wasn’t it? He brought her to the O.G. hop last Christmas.”

“Oh, no; I was never hopeful of him. For one thing, he always did everything she told him.”

Corinne laughed, rattling for cups in a cupboard. “Not a bad thing, was it?”

“Well I don’t know. I don’t think Nico is the kind of person who really likes to have a man on a string. When the first glamour wears off, it’s a bit apt to feel as if you’ve got him on a ball-and-chain—if you see what I mean.”

“H’m. I don’t know that I do; I’ve never had a man on either.”

“Well, one can imagine. For instance, if she was meant to be going out with Colin, and she had a cold, she’d ring up and put him off, and he’d be all sympathy and send flowers and what-not. But if it’s Aubrey, she rushes about gargling and sucking frightful lozenges, so that she’ll be better in time——”

Through the kitchen door, which was ajar, they heard the soft, rubbery swish that heralded the entry of Corinne’s elder brother Terry. He bunted the door open neatly with the footrest of his wheel-chair, and, twisting at the wheel with his powerful hand, turned the chair and closed the door behind him. He looked rather like an expert rider coping with a gate. “I thought I heard you putting the kettle on,” he said. “Hullo, Annabel.” He propelled himself forward and came to rest beside the table.

“Hullo, Terry,” Annabel replied. The point was, she always felt, to speak to Terry just as if he had come into the room on his feet. Feeling this, she probably made her greeting a little warmer and a little more formal than she otherwise might. In the same way she was always both glad and sorry when Terry was present; he affected one’s

consciousness rather as oppositely placed mirrors do: he knew that you were sorry for him, but dared you to show it, so you did not show it, but you knew that he knew you were not showing it, but were really sorry for him, and he knew that you knew that he did not want you to be sorry but refrain from showing it, so you tried not to be sorry, but all the same. . . . So it went on. Every impulse of friendliness reflected back against itself, but one must never mind that, but go on. . . . It made conversation with Terry a strain, much as one tried to treat him as if he had come into the room on his feet.

He might, in any case, Annabel thought, have been a difficult person. Seven years in a wheel-chair could not entirely account for the proud bitterness of his face. She said to him now, as he straightened his drawing-board on his knees and began to sharpen a pencil:

"I came to see this famous patchwork."

"Oh. Scabrous thing. It ought to be draped on the Albert Memorial as a similar monument to bad taste."

"The Albert Memorial is coming back into fashion," observed Corinne mildly, as she warmed the teapot. Terry said nothing to this, and there was a silence. In Terry's presence, Corinne usually wore a certain absent-minded air; she talked to him with this inattentiveness, as if it were a refuge from either appearing to humour him or appearing to take him seriously. If only Terry were on his feet, Annabel reflected, one might be allowed to find him a constraining influence; but, as it was, one could hardly wish he would go away. "Where's Ma?" Corinne asked.

"Bridge at Mrs Alwyn's."

"Oh, yes. I'd forgotten . . . Annabel's sister is engaged. Isn't that nice?"

"Congratulations," said Terry perfunctorily.

Their topic resumed, Annabel and Corinne relaxed again, without being aware of it. They set out plates and knives on the table, and Corinne cut bread and butter.

"Anything to eat, Terry? . . . I suppose they will be putting it in *The Times*?"

"I expect so."

"I must look out for it. . . . Terry, anything to eat?"

"If you would be kind enough to place the bread board within my reach . . ." said Terry austerely. Heavens, thought Annabel, a person can at least answer a question. . . . She said:

"It'll look funny to see the announcement."

"What's his surname?"

"Powell-Duncan. 'Nicola Margaret, eldest daughter of Mr and Mrs Noel Goodwin of . . .' Is that what they say?"

"Yes; a marriage has been arranged . . . or, the engagement is announced——"

"What did you say his name was?" Terry had raised his head. Meeting his eyes directly always gave Annabel a slight shock. It perhaps reminded her that he was a human being. She repeated the name for him half-shyly.

"Oh. How old is he? Was he up at Oxford?"

"I believe he was. Or, I'm not quite sure. . . . He's twenty-seven, I think."

"H'm. What's his first name?"

"Aubrey."

"H'm. That must be the chap Bridget knew," he said to Corinne. "I met him once or twice. I don't remember what college he was in, but I do remember that he was damn nearly sent down once."

"Perhaps it isn't the same person," said Corinne. She added to Annabel: "You know about Bridget? Our cousin who went to Durban."

"Oh, yes; the one who was learning Afrikaans—you told me about that."

Terry threw down his pencil and cut himself a slice of bread. In reply to Corinne, he said rather petulantly:

"There can't be hell of a many people in the world called Aubrey Powell-Duncan. Now can there?"

"I suppose there can't," Corinne agreed politely. She went to the stove to refill the teapot. Annabel wondered quickly whether she were trying to keep off the subject of Oxford. She knew that it was on the Christmas Eve after his first (and last) term there that Terry had had the road accident that caused his injury. Oxford was, then, an unhappy topic. But, was Terry now feeling that they were avoiding the topic deliberately? This seemed to be one of his bad days, Annabel observed to herself, watching him covertly as he buttered his bread. His face looked taut, and greenish shadows showed beside his nostrils. Risking it, she remarked conversationally:

"It can't be a common name; how funny that you should have known him."

"Well, I didn't. He was senior to me. Bridget's year. She went around with him for a while and then gave him the chuck."

"Oh."

"Cake, Annabel? It looks a bit dry; you can put jam on it."

"It's very nice," said Annabel, helping herself. Terry pushed the jam-pot towards her.

"Needs lubricating, all the same," he advised her. "don't know what college he was in; it wasn't Queen's."

"Why was he nearly sent down?" asked Annabel, pursuing the subject since he seemed interested.

"I wasn't up in the details; only had it from Bridget."

"I don't suppose Annabel wants to hear about Aubrey murky past," Corinne put in.

"Oh, it wasn't as murky as all that. Well, depends how you look at it; but, I mean, it wasn't for excessive drinking or anything. I believe there was some little runt that, Powell-Duncan and his crowd took exception to; so they threw him over Magdalen Bridge or something."

"I shouldn't think they'd send people down just for that," said Corinne.

"It would depend how deep the water was under the bridge," said Annabel acutely. "Or is it a railway bridge?"

Terry laughed. Suddenly, the atmosphere of the kitchen was warm and home-like. "Well, it wasn't only that," he said. "And ~~don't~~ take my word for exactly where they threw him; that was only the climax. It seemed they'd been making the little drip's life a misery in various ways."

"Why?"

"I've forgotten. I knew that chap by sight too . . . what was his name . . . Egg, or something? Anyway he was pretty repulsive—greasy and unctuous and humble. I daresay the Powell-Duncan lot thought he made the town look untidy."

"Like Bad Sir Brian Botany."

"Who?"

Corinne quoted: "'On Tuesday and on Friday, To make the street look tidy, He'd collect the passing villagers and kick them in the pond——'"

"That's the idea."

"Poor Egg."

"Oh, I dunno. Being persecuted did at least give him some claim to distinction."

"Well, I should prefer to be quite undistinguished, I think. But I thought it was a thing one grew out of on leaving school?"

"What was?"

"Bullying."

"Oh, rot. Look at any totalitarian state ——"

Annabel interrupted, suddenly uneasy: "I wonder if it was the same person?"

"If who was?"

"Aubrey. Because I don't think that's a very nice story."

"Oh, well; youthful high spirits, you know," said Terry casually.

"Yes . . . but . . . you said, he was nearly sent down—

"I told you, I'm not up in it really. You'd have to check with Bridget; she knew him."

"Well, we can hardly ring up South Africa," said Corinne briskly. "And I think it's a pretty mild story, compared with some of the things one hears about student life."

"Or d'you mean the things one reads in novels?" suggested Terry rather sourly.

Corinne glanced swiftly at Annabel. "Well, you know Father's story about how he and his friends once shoved a live cow into the——"

"Tales out of school," said Mr Baker unexpectedly from the doorway. He came into the kitchen rubbing his scrubbed-looking hands together, nodded to Annabel. "Hullo, Annabel. Pour me out a quick cup, will you, Corry? I've got Mrs Hewett waiting, but she'll have to wait a bit longer. Terry, have a look at that electric fire this evening, will you? I must have both bars on; can't drill people's teeth when they're chattering. And the second bar still won't work. Inclement weather," he added more genially to Annabel. "Haven't you heard the cow story before?"

"No, I haven't," she said, smiling resolutely, because, try as she might, she could not overcome a slight nervousness of Mr Baker when he had his white jacket on. This nervousness was in her case quite unjustified, because her teeth were remarkably good.

"I'll take it to bits again," offered Terry resignedly.

"The cow?" asked Corinne. "Oh—you mean the electric fire."

"Of course I do."

"We nearly had to take that cow to pieces to get it into the lecture hall, I remember," mused Mr Baker, sipping his tea. "Poor beast. It's not a story that I'm proud of, I admit. Your mother not back yet?"

"No. Did you expect her?"

"I want supper early, that's all."

"I can get it," said Corinne. Reminded, she turned to Annabel. "You wanted to be home in good time, didn't you? Come and see my patchwork if you've finished your tea."

"Oh, yes." Annabel, too, had forgotten that she was ostensibly in a hurry. She swallowed her last mouthful of cake and followed Corinne upstairs.

After sincerely admiring the patchwork and discussing the uses of nail varnish, she pondered for a while and then said tentatively:

"It is funny that Terry should have met Aubrey, isn't it?"

"Yes. Listen, I shouldn't think about that story."

"Oh, I shan't. Heavens, it isn't as if it was anything serious."

"No; and anyway, you know, Terry gets a bit rancid about Oxford—and students in general."

"I suppose he might. And he said he doesn't really know much about it."

"No. He does remember things, though, you know. . . . About before his accident . . ."

"Oh, yes—he wouldn't make a thing up."

"But it wasn't anything important."

"Oh, no."

They were hesitantly reassuring each other; and Annabel, remembering Terry's taut, bitter face, felt that Corinne needed to be reassured about profounder matters than Terry's lapse into trivial gossip. Because, she thought, I couldn't myself live in the same house with him for ever, without either being sorry for him or getting annoyed with him. And, he might live to be about eighty—and he'll never get better; there's just no way round it. . . .

Walking home, later, she thought about her own family, and how lucky they had been, by comparison. She and

Nicola and Philippa had never even been very ill. And just now, they would all be so gay and excited and pleased because of Nicola's engagement. There was a hidden worry that fretted at the back of Annabel's mind as she considered this; it was as if Terry might be at their dinner-table this evening; she could almost see his narrow, dark eyes watching them all, watching people who could come into rooms on their feet, and be happy . . .

This was depressing. She hurried along, eager to be back and eager again to see Nicola. As she approached their house she saw that someone had put on the light above the door; it gave a welcoming, slightly festive air to the whole house. Behind the iron balcony rail of the first floor, the green velvet curtains of the drawing-room emitted a diffused glow, like clouds hiding the moon. Above that, lights were on in the higher windows of Mummy's room and Nicola's room. Annabel had to raise her neck to see this as she drew near to the steps, because the house was as tall and narrow (Kitty said) as a always; moreover, Kitty, who slept at the very top, high as insisted that the whole row of buildings rocked in a never wind. This seemed to Annabel rather alarming, but nevertheless she was convinced that the house would never collapse on them. After all, she had been born here, and had tumbled down these tiresome stairs unscathed, and watched the trees in the square change with the seasons ever since she had known what a tree was.

On days like this, she thought, as she opened the front door with her key, the evening is a new dawn. When the house is lit and woken, its life is refreshed. She shouted: "Hull—o!" at large as she began to climb the stairs; Mummy called "Hullo" from her dressing-room, and Kitty from the kitchen, and Philippa from the dining-room. Everyone knew that it was Annabel, but no one looked out of a door to see her, because the fact that she was in the house was enough. In the same way, she passed

up the stairs without seeking anyone out; she knew that they were there. She could smell cooking on the lowest flight, nail varnish on Mummy's level, and, on her own floor, was swamped by the fragrance of bath salts, oozing steamily from the bathroom, where Nicola was splashing and singing 'Let us with a glad some mind' with considerable brio. Annabel yelled "Hullo" again over the noise; Nicola called back merrily.

Annabel and Philippa shared a bedroom. Philippa had evidently changed and gone down to lay the table for Kitty; her school clothes were scattered on her bed, and she had been chinking forks in the dining-room. Annabel kicked aside a stray shoe, said aloud: "Slatternly little beast," and began to pull off her own uniform. She hung her skirt in the wardrobe, threw her blouse into the washing-basket, rolled up her tie neatly, and debated with herself whether to have a bath, should Nicola have left any hot water. She went out to the landing again and called down:

"Is Daddy in?"

"Yes; he's just changing," called back Mummy. "Where have you been?"

"To tea with Corinne. Does he want a bath?"

"I thought you might. . . . No, thank you; you can have one if there's any water." S. sounded a bit dubious; she must have heard this cataract that Nicola was producing too. Annabel called down: "Thanks," and pounded on the bathroom door. "Hurry up. Leave some for me. . . ."

"All right," responded Nicola agreeably from within. She turned off the taps and resumed her hymn more piously. Annabel opened her attaché-case and rummaged for the rough notes of the week's essay. Flinging on a dressing-gown, she sat on her bed to flounder over the Whig Oligarchy.

"Do you think . . .?" said Nicola from the doorway.

Annabel looked up with a start; she must have been concentrating, for once; time had passed, Nicola was dressed and ready, except for the jewellery in her hands, on which she was seeking advice.

"Hullo."

"Hullo." She came into the room. "Do you think," she resumed, "the choker and the amethyst brooch, or just the choker, or the pendant . . . or what?"

She placed herself in front of the dressing-table mirror and looked undecidedly from her reflection to Annabel. Annabel sat up and watched her. How odd to hear Nicola asking for guidance on what to wear; habitually, it was the other way round; it would be: "For heaven's sake, not that bracelet with that dress . . ." or, "Must you chose such *utterly* hideous colours for your stockings. . . ?" But, this evening, there was real deference in Nicola's attitude. Or perhaps it was an expectancy—almost shyness; she stood looking back from the mirror, poised, as if she were wearing something new and over-enterprising and awaited criticism. Or as if she were wearing lipstick for the first time and, while knowing that it suited her, knew, too, that she was still too young. She appeared, though, just as usual; that lavender-coloured dress with white spots, and that skilfully tinted mouth, were familiar to Annabel's sight.

But Annabel, rousing herself slowly from her deep pre-occupation with the Whigs, felt her mind adjusting itself to Nicola in a strange way. Consciousness struggled to identify this person by admitting: This isn't the person I was last talking to. And in doing so, it reproduced the image of Corinne's long, humorous face with blue-rimmed spectacles; at the same moment Annabel's mind said: The other person I was talking to was older than this . . . Then, remembering that it was Corinne, and seeing that this was Nicola, she was puzzled. Older? Well, yes, that was how it had felt. That, too, was how Nicola still seemed, as

she wavered by the dressing-table; she seemed younger than Annabel had ever known her. Not younger in years exactly, but in a kind of defencelessness, a certain reckless bewilderment.

"The pendant," said Annabel mechanically, not giving her mind to the problem, but staring absently at her sister. Nicola held the pendant against her throat; she, too, seemed inattentive to the matter. But she said more briskly to her reflection:

"I left my water for you, because I'd put Roses from the South in. And do step on it; it's quarter to seven."

"Oh—yes. Thanks." Annabel slapped her book shut and went along to the bathroom. Nicola had been so generous with her latest enthusiasm in bath salts that the very steam looked pink. Against the puce water Annabel's legs were coffee-brown and gleaming. "Glorious technicolour," she said aloud, not unappreciatively, shivering a little at the warmth as she pulled a plastic cap over her hair. From downstairs, a burst of 'Barwick Green' announced that Philippa had switched on the drawing-room radio for 'The Archers'. Nicola switched on the radio in her room, out of habit, but instead of listening, came to the bathroom door and leaned on the doorpost to talk to Annabel.

"Anything happen today?" she asked lightly.

"No . . . I don't think so. Miss Craven's back. What are we having for dinner?"

Nicola swayed against her doorpost, her eyes dilating slightly as she grappled with this. She could ask questions, but not answer them. Annabel, feeling that perhaps that question had struck too mundane a note, added:

"—Except Aubrey, of course?"

Nicola laughed. Her face, bent down, softened and dimpled. "We aren't going to eat Aubrey," she murmured, and went on laughing, as if that had been funny. Annabel glanced over a soapy shoulder and said:

"Well, I hope he doesn't expect us to. But I don't suppose he'll be shy."

"Oh, no."

"What kind of ring are you going to have?"

"Ring?" echoed Nicola, surprised. She spread out her hands and looked from one to the other, as if wondering which was which. "We're having chicken," she remembered suddenly. "And sprouts. And chocolate mousse."

Far below, through the noise of two radio sets, the door-bell tinkled.

"'S'him!" gasped Nicola at once. She jerked herself upright, her dilated eyes darkening further, her hands flying to smooth back her hair. She might have been caught in some criminal act; after hesitating for a second, she turned and fled breathless; Annabel heard her dash into her bedroom, rattle something on the dressing-table, and then dash for the stairs. Thud-thud-thud, her feet pounded against the carpet of the upper flight; abruptly, the noise ceased, as she evidently pulled herself up and descended the rest of the way more decorously.

Left with 'The Archers', Annabel dried herself and wandered back to dress. She was late, but had the sense to know that hurrying after a bath only adds to the agitation of unpunctuality. Deliberately, she sought her stockings, the red dress, the geranium lipstick that matched it, the shaggy white-coral necklace, the black court shoes. As 'The Archers' played its way out again, and, cool and refreshed, she was combing her hair, Annabel thought suddenly: I know what Nicola reminds me of; it's like Miranda. 'O brave new world . . .'

The drawing-room had, like all drawing-rooms, been planned consciously, for effect. This evening, it rather looked like it. It was a stage, and the curtain had gone up. Anticipation was checked involuntarily for a moment as one looked round.

The fire, piled high, burnt heartily, little yellow-and-blue flames rippling out of crevices in the logs, and skimming about the porcelain tiles of the hearth. Light poured from the large table-lamp with its green glass base, and from the parchment shade on the standard lamp, mellow across the carpet, but picking out the rims of glasses and the satiny ridges of cushions.

Like a stage, the room shone with artificiality forgotten, or pleasant awareness of illusion; it reflected the tone of the occasion, perhaps. Formality was disguised, so it seemed only natural to disguise informality too, a little. The conclusion was foregone; Aubrey was already one of the family. But, for that very reason, no one was going to accept him uncritically. He was also an outsider in their midst; for that very reason, no one was going to treat him as a stranger.

So he sat on the white-and-green sofa, taking his part in the game. He was at ease, but not too much at home. He was one of the family now, but not too much at ease. The conversation was smooth, but not chatty. Annabel, when she came in, felt the drawing-room-comedy atmosphere and fell into it as if she had entered upon cue.

"The latecomer," remarked Mummy, pointlessly but serenely.

"Good evening," said Aubrey, rising.

"Good evening. Congratulations."

"Thank you; I'm sure I am to be congratulated."

Daddy was still standing by the cocktail cabinet. He waved a bottle of gin menacingly, and Annabel said:

"Sherry, please. I'll help myself."

"Steady on, then."

"It's all right; I've got a good head," she told him, with the casual assurance of someone who has never put that statement to the test. She filled her glass neatly.

"Well now that we're all here . . ." began Daddy, taking his own glass and making for his armchair.

"Am I in time for the toast?" Annabel waited by the cabinet, her glass aloft.

There was an alert silence. Noel Goodwin, pausing on the hearthrug, could not decide whether Annabel had stolen his line or prepared the way for him. He stood with his back to the fire and looked benevolently at the gathering, groping for words. In the end he said: "Well . . . Aubrey and Nicola . . ." and raised his glass.

The others, except Aubrey and Nicola, murmured and sipped. There was another silence. Noel turned his glass in his hand and, looking at it, remarked jovially:

"And a great comfort it will be to me to have another man in the family at last."

That observation was not, he knew, particularly witty; but it was the best he had been able to do, in the short time at his disposal. He had intended to think something out during lunch at his club, but today he had happened to meet old Brigadier Hapworth just back from Scotland, and had, of course, been glad to hear about the old boy's doings. . . . Noel now subsided into his armchair and took a good swig of his drink.

He saw that Margaret had slipped off her left shoe. That, he knew, was a symptom: she felt that this occasion might be going with more of a swing. He consulted the shoe with his eyes, but was not inspired. He agreed that it was all somehow ticklish, but he would not have expected anyone but himself to think so. This engagement had taken him by surprise, and his surprise was in a way retrospective, so that he felt almost guilty. He ought to have been expecting it. Or anyway, he ought to have been expecting his daughter to grow up. At this moment, it seemed that his last clear picture of Nicola was of her appearing in the doorway of that bungalow they had taken one summer—in the Isle of Wight—and holding out dripping red hands, and saying in a voice that had to be a shout in case it trembled: "That *damn* bike skidded on

the gravel. . . .” Well, but that must have been . . . six years ago? Funny thing to think of just at this moment. There was no connection between that sandy and lacerated schoolgirl and the svelte young woman sitting on the green-and-white sofa.

Noel had in fact regarded the growing up of all his daughters with some dismay. He had covered the dismay with amusement, and perhaps failed to believe that his noisy little girls could betray him like this. He had thought all their foibles, their dress allowances and views on existentialism and waftings of perfume and appearances at cocktail parties, to be just a game they were up to, abetted by their mother. Today, though, he reconsidered the three of them cautiously. This caper of Nico’s was no joke. There would have to be no end of fuss and upset. . . . Oh, well, it would be Margaret’s affair. She’d enjoy it. But, didn’t the bride’s father have to reply to some kind of a toast? . . .

He mused, listening to the conversation, which was vacillating between party-talk and family-chatter. Margaret asked Aubrey whether he liked winter sports, and they discussed the muscular torments that followed skiing. They estimated, helped by Annabel, the annual snowfall in Great Britain. They tried to decide why winter sports could not be established in the Scottish Highlands. Margaret offered Aubrey another drink, and Noel said:

“Help yourself.”

He did, deftly and gratefully. Margaret asked suddenly:

“Oh, Noel, who on earth were the Yorkists, exactly? I was trying to remember this afternoon.”

“The . . . ?”

“Edward the Fourth, you know; how could he claim the succession to the throne? I’ve got it all muddled.”

So had Noel. He smiled indulgently, and Aubrey, returning to the sofa, said:

"The Wars of the Roses always had me beat. Edward the Third had too many children, didn't he? I expect your claim would originate with that old scoundrel John of Gaunt."

"Oh, but John of Gaunt was *nice*!" protested Philippa quickly. She had a way of throwing in remarks that were just slightly irrelevant to the general conversation, so that people could do nothing but look at her kindly. They all looked at her kindly, and she looked round at them, her wide eyes glowing, her glass of lime-juice clutched in both hands.

"Are you thinking of Richard the Second?" asked Aubrey, smiling at her. "'This sceptred isle' . . . ?"

Philippa nodded, shy. Margaret said crisply: "No, Aubrey; he was 'time-honoured Lancaster'. You've got it back to front."

"At least I've eliminated half the field, then," he replied. They frowned at each other in sympathetic concentration.

"Yes. . . . Not that it matters. I do get these mental fidgets sometimes. . . . Noel, do help us. It was Richard Duke of York, you know . . . the one Cade rebelled for . . . but his father was——"

"Oh, don't bother me, woman. Get our historian on to it. When I've spent so much money on educating these girls. . . ." This well-worn gibe affected Annabel just as he had known it would. From the corner of his eye he saw her looking down, her lashes quivering a little, but her face demure. He was pleased to see that she could, in company, restrain that glance of withering scorn that she more usually bestowed on his sallies. She said gently:

"That Richard was the son of the Earl of Cambridge beheaded for high treason by Henry the Fifth . . ." They listened to her explanation, Margaret's brow clearing as she nodded.

Noel went to pour his second drink, collecting Margaret's glass in passing. He felt detached from this group;

a spectator. He was not alone in this. Each of them felt detached, apart and watchful. Noel, as a man with a wife and three daughters, often felt like this in his own house, so for him the experience was not exceptional. Tonight it was emphasised by his vague sense of inadequacy to the turn of events, but he was confident that Margaret would have the situation in hand, and would ultimately remember to order the carnation for his button-hole. Back in his chair, he watched Margaret peacefully and waited for his dinner.

Margaret's mind was running, as ever, on parallel tracks. She, too, was a spectator of this scene, and for her the sensation was rather more unusual, so that she wondered fleetingly whether she should have accepted a second drink. With the kicking off of her left shoe she had shed the restraint of the occasion, so that the talk was flowing in what seemed to be its appointed way. But she was thinking about the family with a strange urgency. This is a breaking-up, she reflected; a beginning of an end that is a new beginning. So far, we were a family, a self-contained thing. Now, it is cracking; it is like a crack in the bud of one of those poppies—do I mean an Icelandic poppy; I must ask someone. . . . And when it cracks, the petal comes drooping out, and spreads. . . . I think this engagement is a good thing. Nico was ready to settle for someone, and I like Aubrey. But there will be the others. . . . In a way, I don't feel like their mother any more. Though, in another way, I feel more so. When they get to this stage they don't need me any more, but they do; they need me more than ever. I wonder what I shall be like as a mother-in-law—or—good Lord—a grandmother!

She laughed aloud at this thought, and caught Noel's eye, but did not say why she laughed. Nico might feel it immodest. There was no knowing what Nico might feel just now, though. One would have to be careful. . . . Margaret studied her, over the rim of her glass. She looks

lovely this evening . . . but, I must say, a bit vacant. She's absolutely in the clouds still, poor creature—I mean, lucky creature. . . . At any rate, there will be enough practical matters to come to sober anyone up. Clothes . . . order a cake . . . where for the reception? Whom to ask—*must* we have all the Cheltenham relatives, I wonder? Must ask Noel. And of course, when is the wedding to be?

Still wondering this, she reverted to her study of the family. Because Nicola had taken flight so abruptly, Margaret was inexplicably nervous about the other two. Not that she expected them to announce engagements, but she felt dimly that she had not really looked at them for a long time. Even Noel looked a little alien as he lay back in his chair, wearing the benign expression that probably covered hunger.

"But, when you and Mummy got engaged . . ." Philippa was saying to him. Noel glanced at Margaret almost furtively; and she interrupted her train of ideas to remember, for a vivid instant, a quite horrible picnic in the Banchester woods, and some prawns—young Margaret Cornish eating them, out of bravado, but seeing their anguished black eyes—then running off and being miserably sick among some brambles, and Noel Goodwin coming to look for her—she had known it would be Noel who came; even now she felt again the unconcerned sturdiness of that supporting arm. She shuddered at the memory, but laughed, and said:

"We got engaged at a picnic."

"So we did," agreed Noel blandly.

"It was you who was seasick on the way to France, though," Margaret told him, startling the others, who could not follow the association.

Noel said: "H'm. We went to France for our honeymoon . . ." and Nicola blinked quickly in Aubrey's direction. Margaret noticed the blink and, the two honeymoons tangled in her mind, thought: Mother never told

me anything, but I seem to have survived. And I'm sure Nicola could tell me a thing or two already. Or, I would have thought so until today; but she certainly looks as if all her ideas had been blown out of her head. . . . Un-
awarely echoing Annabel's impression, she noted that, at the moment,* Annabel seemed the elder of those two. Margaret, comparing them, observed that they were less alike than she had always supposed. Annabel had much more of Noel's short squareness, especially about the jaw-line. But all the same, it was idiotic of the girl to complain that she was too fat. She was compactly solid, of course, but had a small waist and neat ankles. In that red dress, she was at least nineteen and very assured; she did know how to put her clothes on, appreciated Margaret, unconsciously fishing with her left foot for its errant slipper. Annabel was going through a Responsible Prefect phase—that was probably why she looked so aloof. Oh, phases, phases, Margaret fretted, turning her eyes towards Philippa. Philippa, dreaming on her tapestry stool in the hearth corner, looked just now rather like Nicola. At least her meditateness had a rapt quality; her composure was as complete as Annabel's but by no means as reliable. When we all stand up, Margaret decided, I must notice whether she is the tallest of the three now; I'm sure she must be. But . . . Philippa's arms, under the short sleeves of her navy-blue taffeta, were like peeled sticks, and her fingers fidgeted with her glass. She leaned forward, staring at the fire, and her hair slid down past her cheeks, floppy, like raffia outside an ironmonger's shop. Her nostrils trembled, her eyes narrowed and widened, as she floated adrift in thought. What can it be about? wondered Margaret. Anxiety touched her swiftly, as it so often did where Philippa was concerned. But no one ever knew what Philippa was thinking. Anyone might suppose she was in love too, concluded Margaret. I wonder . . . someone at school? Annabel might know. . . . No, I mustn't pry. But

she does look rather in Nicola's state. . . . Glancing towards Nicola again, she met Aubrey's eye, and they looked away from each other as if their thoughts had collided.

Aubrey had been wondering why Mrs Goodwin was watching Philippa like that; wondering, too, what she was thinking. It surprised him still to recollect that he had been to her Silver Wedding party. Mr Goodwin, yes; he must be all of fifty-five. But Mrs . . . ? He speculated, and reminded himself to ask Nico. Couldn't be more than forty-six, and didn't look that. Thin women, of course, didn't get that matronly look. . . . He liked her sleek grey velvet, an unusual choice for a middle-aged blonde; he liked the way she had kicked off a shoe, while conversing in that inattentive manner that he had found forbidding at first, but now began to find disarming. He liked her; he liked this family, which was in the circumstances just as well. But, pleasant as the party was, he was conscious enough of being under inspection to reserve some of his own scrutiny. He kept his mind on the conversation, except for the part of it that was aware only of Nicola; his eyes studied the room and the faces, and returned repeatedly to the fold of lavender silk that lay over the sofa cushion beside him, and the slim black sandal that was half-buried in the sheepskin of the rug beside his own well-polished shoe.

The room, with its ambers and cool greens and whites and low-placed lighting, satisfied him in its artless graciousness. Just, he thought, the kind of room that one would expect Nicola to emerge from. . . . Would one expect me, though, to emerge from the sitting-room at Elm Ridge? However, one family at a time. . . . He continued his slow study of this family, deciding that he had better prepare his speech for that probable moment after dinner when he and his host would be left alone at the table. Mr Goodwin was clearly not the patriarchal type, and would leave initiative to his guest. And, apart from that of Nicola,

what topics of conversation would be acceptable? Golf; foreign affairs, in outline; the rising cost of living. . . . Without Mrs Goodwin's support there would be no rambles into mediaeval history or annual snowfalls. And yet, Aubrey felt, Mrs Goodwin's generalities were not a mask for indifference. She was, behind it all, summing him up, and he found himself hoping that her judgement would be favourable.

He was quite aware that Annabel, on his far left, was summing him up too. He could see her reflected in the convex mirror that hung above the bookcase. She was not watching him steadily, but every time he spoke, her glance in his direction was prolonged, and her expression as she looked down into her glass was withdrawn and reflective. Aubrey was a little amused, not at all dismayed. He thought her a pretty little creature—not pretty in Nicola's style, of course; whereas Nicola reminded him sometimes of a kitten, Annabel reminded him now of another kind of kitten; a taut little tom-kitten who has just caught its first mouse.

" . . . Yes, I expect you're right," he was agreeing aloud with Mrs Goodwin. "Though I've known very few Indians. There were several at Oxford when I was there——"

Annabel looked up quickly. Something in that remark had given her a slight jar; only now did she remember what Terry had said this afternoon. At Oxford. . . . It was, just now, rather confused. Terry's face flashed into her mind again, as disquietingly as it had on her walk home. This time, she tried deliberately to send away the image; this had nothing to do with Terry, this cosy, amiable gathering round the drawing-room fire. Good heavens, Annabel told herself, if everybody kept thinking all the time about people who are crippled—or poor, or ill, or anything—no one would ever have any peace. Of course one is sorry for people—but . . .

But, it was not only the image of Terry that she wanted to send away; it was the memory of what he had said about Aubrey. Though, remembering it, just what had he said? That Aubrey had bullied another student—thrown him over a bridge—it was not only Aubrey, but his friends—and Terry hadn't even been sure of his facts. He had said so.

And then, the information that Aubrey had 'gone around for a while' with the unknown cousin Bridget; well, that could not possibly matter. Aubrey must surely have 'gone around with' many people; Annabel's picture of the most decorous social life allowed for this. And anyway, look at Nicola and Colin, or Nicola and John, or Nicola and that blue-eyed one with the yacht, one summer holiday. . . .

Thus explaining away her anxiety, Annabel found that she had not dispelled it. But she could not understand why not. Closely now, she studied Aubrey. She was not anxious about him, really, but he was relevant to the other anxieties: to her uneasiness about Terry himself, and to her concern for Nicola. With sudden perception, Annabel thought: Unhappiness and happiness both make people so vulnerable. . . . She glanced at Nicola, still bathed in rosy light and paying scarcely any attention to the conversation, and then back at Aubrey. But he was all right; he was *nice*. So she assured herself, scrutinising him. She had noticed him to be tall, handsome, assured, courteous; but now, unwillingly, she examined the corners of his mouth, and the slight downward line between his brows. It's a question, she reflected, of what he is *really* like; not just when he is at a dinner-party, or while he is young, or while he is in love. . . . But *really*.

When he is about forty-five, for instance; when he has children; when he is the Chairman of his firm; or, when, perhaps the firm goes bankrupt and he has to find a new way of earning money; or when he is retired and elderly,

and the children are grown up, and he and Nicola are left alone in some gardeny-looking country house. . . . And for that matter, what was he like as a little boy—or as a student? I wonder if Nicola has wondered about these things. I have a feeling that she just sees him *now*, and that is enough for her. But . . .

But Annabel, also seeing him *now*, thought she could trace lines of hardness on his face; lines of imperiousness. Of course, she protested inwardly, everyone is selfish really. I am. I'm sure my face shows it. . . . And I wouldn't like him to be *all* sweet gentleness—that wouldn't be useful to anyone, really. But I wish I could be sure——

Aubrey turned towards her unexpectedly, as if he thought she was about to speak; or as if she had attracted his attention by unconsciously speaking aloud. She was disconcerted, but, without knowing why, she returned his look steadily, determined not to let her eyes drop before his. She had better say something. She asked:

"Did you like being at Oxford?"

He replied conventionally: "I think everyone does. It's like nothing else in one's life."

"Everyone?" she echoed, thinking of the Mr Egg.

Aubrey drew his brows together for a moment, puzzled. Mummy said:

"Annabel is hoping to go to Oxford herself."

"Are you?" asked Aubrey kindly. "I'm sure you'll like it."

"I hope I shall." Her tone sounded, to herself, a little distant. Mummy looked at her. Philippa, rousing herself, looked at her wonderingly for a moment. Then the gong rang from the foot of the staircase; they heard the sound break off with a thud as Kitty dropped the stick, and then finish its brassy summons more emphatically.

"Dinner," said Daddy, with enthusiasm. They all rose. Annabel collected the glasses on to the tray, to carry down for Kitty, and stood aside as Mummy and Nicola went out

of the room. Aubrey signed to her to follow Nicola, and she said: "Thank you," as if he were bestowing some favour on her by allowing her to come between the two of them. He signed to Philippa to go next, as she hesitated, but Noel said: "Carry on, Aubrey," and held Philippa back to go downstairs beside himself, with his hand heavily gripping her shoulder.

2

January

"I REMEMBER where that shop was," said Nicola suddenly. "I saw it from the top of a bus, half-way along *that* side of Oxford Street." She jerked her head.

"What shop?" asked Margaret, over a letter.

"The one with Slendacurve brassières."

"Are they something special?" Annabel wanted to know as she helped herself to kedgeriee from the hot-plate.

"Well, they seem to fit me, that's all I can say. I must have too much chest-expansion and not enough bust, because most of them——"

"I know. They're so tight round your ribs that they cut you in half, but——"

Margaret interrupted, glancing at Noel, who was paying no attention to this conversation; all the same, she felt it hardly suitable to mixed company. "Where's Philippa? She's late."

"Last seen in the top bathroom, squeezing toothpaste on to her sponge," said Annabel. "I think getting married must be a good idea, it seems to force one to make a stand on all details of clothing——"

"What do you mean about Philippa?" Margaret persisted.

"Oh, only that she's in a dozey state. I expect she'll stagger down in a minute."

"She won't have time for a proper breakfast," fretted her mother. She re-folded her letter and went to the hot-

plate to prepare Philippa's kedgerec. "Nico darling—if you're going up—give her a reminder, will you?"

"Right." Nicola drifted out in her trailing dressing-gown.

Noel folded his paper and pushed back his chair. "Well . . . someone in this family has to work for a living," he announced, rising and staring glumly out of the window for a moment. The January morning was still pink and frost-dimmed. "Brrrr!" said Noel, and strode out after Nicola.

"Slendacurve?" said Annabel musingly. "That's a new one. . . . Do you think I'll make so much fuss about my trousseau when I get married? If I do," she added unpessimistically.

"She hasn't got so very long to buy everything. . . . Annabel, is Philippa sleeping well nowadays?"

"The wedding isn't for another five months, dash it. . . . Philippa? I don't know; she always seems to be asleep when I go to bed. And she wakes up late enough in the morning, heaven knows."

"Yes . . . but . . . I am rather worried about her. She seems to be in such a wrought-up state."

"She is a bit daft," conceded Annabel, stretching for the toast.

"Oh, no. Don't be unkind, darling."

"Well . . . All right; it's just a daft mood that gets her."

"But . . . Well, anyway, do you know what's upsetting her?"

"No."

"I thought perhaps she was worried about something at school."

"Quite likely. But I can't see what."

"Oh dear. I'd hoped you might. . . . She hasn't said anything?"

"No. I say, is the clock right? It's time I went——"

"Oh—but Philippa——"

"Philippa can get up in time if she wants to come with me."

"Annabel," said Margaret sharply, "I do think you could be a bit more——"

The door opened slowly on Philippa's entrance. She walked just as slowly, with bent head, to her chair, and sat down. Then she said doubtfully:

"I'm late, aren't I?"

"Very," said Annabel.

Philippa looked up at that, with a start, as if she had been woken abruptly. Her eyes flew to Margaret's, anxiously. Margaret, still standing by the hot-plate, felt the frown that she had assumed for her reproof to Annabel soften into an anxiety that matched Philippa's.

"Come on, darling," she said. "Here's your kedgerree."

"I don't want . . ." murmured Philippa, unfolding her napkin and pleating it together again.

"What's the matter? Don't you feel very well?"

"Oh, yes," Philippa whispered to her napkin.

"Come on, then. You must have some breakfast."

She put the plate in front of Philippa. Annabel stood up and pushed in her chair, draining her coffee-cup in the other hand. "Well, hurry up," she said, clashing the cup on to its saucer.

"Don't nag her," said Margaret.

"Well, it is twenty-past eight."

Philippa said, as if yielding to pressure: "I had b-bad dreams." Heavy tears splashed on to the sleeve of her blouse.

"Oh, Lord," said Annabel, not impatiently.

"Be quiet," Margaret told her. She went behind Philippa's chair and put her hands on the thin shoulders. Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, she repeated to herself silently. She was intuitively and painfully aware of the significance of this bottomless can't-wake-up feeling; it made her own throat tighten. "Darling . . . don't cry. It's all right. . . .

Look, have a drink of coffee. I'll put the sugar in for you.
... Pip, don't cry. . . ."

"I'm sorry," said Philippa, on a hiccuping sob.

"I'm going up to get my books," announced Annabel.

"Oh . . . wait for me——"

"No, darling, you *must* have something . . . come on——"

"I d-don't want . . ."

Margaret supplied a handkerchief, and sat down in Annabel's vacated chair. "Pip, please . . . Listen, would you rather not go to school? I think you're feeling a bit old-lady, aren't you? Why not stay at home and sit by the fire for a bit?"

"I don't know . . ."

Margaret stirred the coffee and moved it nearer. Annabel said impartially:

"If she is staying at home, you'd better write an excuse-note for me to take."

"Yes, I will——"

"Oh, wait a minute . . ." broke in Philippa, with tearful desperation.

"Can't," said Annabel, unperturbed.

"Annabel, I wish you'd leave her alone," snapped Margaret.

"If I did, she'd probably sit dripping there all morning," retorted Annabel, without heat.

"Of course she won't. It's only because you bully her like this . . ."

Margaret and Annabel eyed each other, measuringly. Margaret thought: She has a heart of stone, that girl. But I wish I had a rather stonier heart sometimes, when Philippa is concerned. I know I'm being helpless, but I just can't bear this . . .

Annabel said clearly to Philippa, in the tone of one reasoning with a half-wit: "You want to come to school, don't you?"

To Margaret's surprise, Philippa nodded vehemently.

"Well, then. I'm leaving in exactly three minutes, if you want to come with me." She went out briskly.

"You need not go to school, if you don't feel like it," said Margaret reassuringly.

Philippa nodded and then shook her head; she blew her nose and handed Margaret's handkerchief back to her, with a gesture almost of renunciation, and began to push back her chair.

"No, Philippa," Margaret restrained her, with what she felt to be somewhat belated maternal authority. "You're not going without something to eat."

Philippa hesitated, then picked up her fork and jabbed it into the kedgeree on her plate. She presented the forkful to her trembling lips, and with an apparent effort began to chew, while fresh tears slid down her cheeks. The desolate stuffing was more than Margaret could stand; her own eyes stung with tears. 'I ought to know what to do, she urged herself—I ought to say, leave that beastly stuff alone and go back to bed and have your sleep out. . . .

Nicola came in, carrying a volume of the telephone directory. "Bolton's is double-three-eight-two," she said. "Oh, hullo—I thought these two had gone."

"Nicola, *will* you put some clothes on?" cried Margaret, with most unexpected shrewishness. "I can't think why you've started this slovenly habit of coming down to breakfast in your dressing-gown. When everyone else is dressed, I do think you might——"

"All right, I will," said Nicola, slightly dismayed but unabashed. She glanced at Philippa. "What's the matter with the babe this morning?"

"Nothing," said Philippa through her unchewable mouthful.

"Leave her alone. Really, you two do *nag* at her——"

"Philipp-a!" called Annabel from the hall, upon cue. Philippa jumped up, dropping her fork, and stumbled out of the room. As she opened the door, the others

saw Annabel waiting, hatted and coated, and holding Philippa's satchel and outdoor clothes ready. Margaret went to the doorway and watched, undecided. From the basement stairs came the purring groan that meant Kitty had started the washing-machine. Kitty herself appeared at the top of the stairs to ask:

"No towels to wash from the top bathroom?"

"Oh, bother—I forgot—and we're late——" said Annabel, directing Philippa's left hand into its coat-sleeve.

"So I suppose I'm expected to climb all that way up . . ." Kitty lost interest in her grievance, watching Philippa. "What's up with you this morning?"

"Nothing," gasped Philippa, struggling with buttons.

"She wouldn't eat any breakfast," said Margaret to this new audience.

"That's a shame; I thought you liked kedgeree."

"Oh, Annabel, wait—I'm ready—it's just my music, it's my music-lesson day . . ." Philippa floundered upstairs to the drawing-room, hauling herself by the banisters. Annabel opened the front door and let in a blast of the raw morning. Kitty disappeared into the kitchen, and returned to meet Philippa and proffer a paper bag.

"A mince-pie for your elevenses. Mind you eat it."

"All right." Philippa smiled waterily, and crammed the bag into her pocket. "Good-bye . . ."

The front door banged. Kitty said, with some satisfaction: "What a commotion!" and Nicola started up-stairs, calling back:

"I'll bring those towels down, in a moment, I'm going up to dress; Mummy says I'm a sloven."

"She's not far wrong," agreed Kitty, as she withdrew.

Margaret went to the hall window and stared out; but the two girls were already out of sight. Nicola was already in her bedroom, switching on the radio; Kitty was back in the basement, singing. Left alone, Margaret began to feel futile. I ought, she told herself, to have thought of a

mince-pie; and thought of her music; and I ought at least to have made her drink some coffee. And all I do is agonise over her.

She decided that as a mother she was a conspicuous failure.

Annabel and Philippa walked in silence out of the square and along the road to the bus stop. They were more fortunate than most Londoners in their travelling arrangements, because their home was nearer to central London than their school; so they travelled always in the opposite direction to the throng. Now, they waited only a few seconds for an outward-bound bus, half-empty. As they sat side by side on the upper deck, Annabel took out an essay that had to be handed in today, and read it over critically. Philippa sat close to her, reading over her arm, less from interest or curiosity than from an automatic dependence. After a while Annabel unscrewed her pen and with a judicial air crossed out and altered a word, changing the phrase '... benefit to humanity...' into '... benefit to civilisation...' She considered this sagely; so did Philippa.

They passed a row of shops, and Annabel, stowing away her essay, craned to examine a window of sports equipment. "Did you see how much that canoe was?" she asked, peering back.

Philippa jumped guiltily. "No . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"All right—I only wondered."

Otherwise they did not speak until they were at the school-gates. Here Philippa, who had been walking close to Annabel with a somnambulistic bearing, hesitated and looked about her in sudden anxiety.

"Feeling better?" asked Annabel calmly; and without waiting for an answer: "Look—here's Jennifer." She waited, with her hand on the strap of Philippa's satchel, until Jennifer Vane caught sight of them and hurried up.

"Hullo Philippa—good morning, Annabel." They moved on in trio. "I say Philippa—you know that second problem? Did you make x be the number of men? Because I did; I thought that was what she told us—but it kept on coming to seven-eighths of a man . . ." Philippa laughed, rather shakily, as she and Jennifer went off down the stairs to the junior cloakroom. Annabel looked after them for a moment with a frown.

She'll snap out of it now, I expect, she told herself. If only Mumimy wouldn't get in such a state. . . .

Annabel had no high opinion of 'states'. At least, she knew them to be contagious, and thought that such contagion should, in the interests of all, be resisted. It did not help, she felt, if one just tumbled into the same pit as the first victim, like the brothers in 'Titus Andronicus'. Detachment she considered a desirable and cultivable asset. Nowadays, she found herself cultivating it pretty strenuously at home; at times she saw herself rather like Elinor Dashwood. During the Christmas holidays she had had leisure to study Nicola's state of mind as well as Philippa's, and, as her detachment did not absolve her from responsibility, she was a little concerned. The wedding had been planned for early June. Nicola said that this would give her plenty of time to collect her trousseau and make all the various arrangements; but Annabel sometimes wondered whether plenty of time might not have its drawbacks.

Five months. Well no, less than that really; only four more complete months until the wedding. But what on earth was it that Nicola was so busy about? Annabel found it hard to define this when she considered the matter. She only knew that Nicola behaved, more and more often, as if the third of June were the millennium—or at least as if, after that date, she would never be able to buy anything else for the rest of her life. And everything she bought now in preparation must be exactly right.

Well, Annabel herself quite saw the value of having things exactly right; nevertheless, she hoped that, in Nicola's place, she wouldn't demand quite so much committee-work from everyone else on the selection of each undergarment.

Yet again, one was only married once—usually. So it was important that everything should be up to standard. . . . Behind the committee-meeting atmosphere, though, there was another urgency that Annabel noticed; there was a kind of abstract principle involved. She sometimes felt that Nicola didn't care desperately about what style of brassière she selected, and, probably, nor did Aubrey; but, there was this necessity for *it* to be all right.

Which being so, the cut of a brassière became, to Annabel, less significant, while to Nicola it seemed to become more so. There was a constant fidget in the household that Nicola evidently enjoyed, but at times it made her fractious. Annabel, in the same way, sometimes enjoyed the commotion and sometimes dodged it. There was plenty of time to arrange everything; so it would be less excusable if everything were not perfect. But then, how could everything be perfect? asked Annabel silently, more than once. She watched Nicola; she remembered the sage advice she had read on the back pages of women's magazines about the strain of long engagements. She watched Nicola vacillating between the Miranda-mood of that first evening of the engagement and a mood of sheer contrariness. Sometimes Nicola was maddening, and sometimes appealing; but in either case, she was a half-translated creature.

Today, Annabel thought about her frequently. There was a new thread of anxiety running through her mind, a thread tangled in one recent and one imminent event. The connection between these she came slowly to understand in the course of the day. During School Prayers she pondered on the moment yesterday when she had come

into the house and found Nicola at the telephone in the hall; as Annabel passed, she had been saying: "... Oh, all right, if that's the best you can do. ... But I did *say* dress circle, you know. ... Yes. All right. ..."

Annabel, on the way upstairs, asked idly: "Who was that?"

"Aubrey, of course," snapped Nicola, clapping down the receiver.

"Oh ... sorry." She hadn't supposed that it would be Aubrey. Today, remembering, she remembered why: she had never heard Nico talking to him in that tone before. But then, why shouldn't she? It was only a moment's pique; nothing approaching a quarrel. And if they did quarrel, Annabel reminded herself firmly, what in the world has it to do with me?

All the same, as the School filed out after Prayers, she was thinking about Aubrey and Nicola with a fretful concentration. Later in the morning, in an idle moment, she found herself fretting again about something else. She had started to wonder what to wear this evening when she went to dinner at the Bakers'; and, in that, there was a connected worry. The Bakers'? Corinne? Terry? Well, Terry was usually a bit of a fly-in-the ... No, it was all bound up with Aubrey. How silly. It was at the back of her mind again—that ridiculous story about Aubrey and the Mr Egg who was thrown over a bridge.

It was silly, but, in a way, inevitable, it seemed. Mr Egg had come to represent a certain unease of mind to Annabel by now. And today she felt as if she really must raise the topic again with Terry, if she had the opportunity; she must once and for all dispel it. This was not so much because she was afraid of strife between Aubrey and Nicola, as because she had still the feeling that Nicola might need moral support in some unpredictable way. And with this in view, Annabel must tidy up her own picture of the whole situation.

' She worried over this for some minutes, drawing a daisy on her blotting-paper. The idle moment that offered itself for these meditations happened to be during a history lesson; Miss Bryce was reading aloud to them, from an article in last week's *Times Literary Supplement*. Gillian had already read the article, and Annabel knew that she would be able to borrow Gillian's copy later and read the article to herself in half the time; so, through sheer indolence, she let Miss Bryce ramble on, while she followed her own ideas.

It isn't, she insisted, that Nico and Aubrey are squabbling, or anything like that. But I do think this engagement has gone on for a long time. . . . I know quite well that Nicola's bound to have her ups and downs, but I wish I felt that she was a bit safer. I wish I didn't have this horrid feeling that she has been rather *too* happy. . . . No, not too happy, but just a bit feckless. I don't want her to be disillusioned. . . . Well, how can I help that? She can take care of herself. At least, if she can't, I can't hope to look after her. . . . But this brought Annabel back to her mood of the earlier morning, when Mummy and Philippa had been grappling with the question of breakfast. It reminded her that detachment was a valuable asset. It reminded her that she was really very angry with Terry Baker, because he had poked this horrid little doubt into her mind, so that she herself seemed to have a share in Nicola's potential worries.

And even if Nicola did not happen to be worried—in fact, she evidently wasn't—Annabel was; and it was all Terry's fault. Or, was it. Perhaps Annabel was exaggerating; she must ask Terry, if she could. She had hardly seen him since that Friday afternoon whereon he had mentioned Aubrey. Probably he had forgotten all about it by now?

Yes, but there was still this niggling doubt somewhere in her mind. . . . Annabel sighed aloud, screwing herself

round in her chair. Miss Bryce glanced up, pausing in her reading.

"Did you say something, Annabel?"

"No, Miss Bryce."

Nora Bryce studied her for a moment. She looked down, and saw the profusion of daisies on the blotting-paper. She glanced sidelong, and saw that Gillian's sheet of paper was still blank except for a very creditable rhinoceros in the margin, to which Gillian was just adding a horn.

Nora Bryce had a cold coming on. Her eyes were pink and her nose waxy; she knew that she looked hideous, and hence compelled herself to look unattractive. She was waiting for a letter from her cousin Mark, who was supposed to be coming up to London and taking her to a theatre; the letter was, she calculated, overdue. She was not, in fact, in the happiest of tempers. And at the moment she was hungry, not for staff-room dinner, either.

She shook out her paper as if to go on reading, but could not at once find her place, moreover, she did not want to. She looked up again at Gillian Cohen with undisguised rancour; Gillian did not meet her look, but laid down her pen and stared at the foggy sky outside the window.

"Shall I go on?" suggested Miss Bryce, with ominous patience.

Neither of her pupils spoke; they just turned politely inquiring faces towards her.

"If you aren't interested," pursued Miss Bryce, "do please say so."

They looked at her, slightly disconcerted. Then Gillian's eyebrows went up. Her expression meant only that she was entirely at Miss Bryce's disposal; but to Miss Bryce it conveyed nothing of the kind.

To Miss Bryce it was a culminating insult. She laid down the paper and said

"I'm afraid there is nothing anyone can teach you, is there, Gillian?"

This statement sounded clearly to all three of them with more petulance than irony; its tone was unanswerable. Yet Nora Bryce was waiting for an answer; she had to. Someone would have to extricate her from this.

Annabel, rousing herself, looked at Gillian. Gillian's face had whitened, but she said mildly:

"Yes, of course, Miss Bryce."

"Well," retorted Miss Bryce, with more spirit than grace, "I wish I thought so."

Gillian sat still, but the hand that played with her pen trembled slightly. Miss Bryce pushed back her chair. Her face was flushed. She summoned her dignity and said:

"You understand that I only want to help you."

They did; but Gillian had known that it would not have been helpful to Miss Bryce to be told that today's lesson was redundant. Gillian and Annabel wanted to help Miss Bryce, as well; but they felt they could hardly say so.

"Ever since I came to this school," went on Miss Bryce, warming to her speech, "I have known that you imagine I can't teach you anything. I've had to sit opposite you, lesson after lesson, and watch you listening to me—or pretending to listen—with that scornful expression. I suppose you think you're very clever . . ."

She hesitated, and Annabel, with chilly spiders running up the back of her scalp, knew that this exhibition must be stopped. She didn't care if little Bryce made a fool of herself, but this kind of slanging-match was more than Gillian would be able to stand. To accuse a clever person of being clever was, after all, as unkind as to taunt a cripple with being a cripple. Annabel tilted her chair back on two of its legs, and swung a leg nonchalantly between her fingers.

"Well," she said blandly, "so she is, isn't she?"

There was a silence; Miss Bryce was glaring, uncertainly,

at Annabel; Gillian had laid her forehead on her hand. Annabel went on, smiling cheerfully, at leisure:

"All that family has an I.Q. of about a thousand, you know. They find it quite a social handicap. And going to their house is like meeting half a dozen Socrateses in the market-place. Her father's a professor, and her mother wrote a pamphlet about sixth-dimensional geometry, or something, a few months ago—it's terrifying."

She eyed Miss Bryce resolutely, smiling, tilting her chair. Miss Bryce looked at Gillian for a moment, but Gillian did not raise her head.

"Mind you," Annabel added to Gillian, "it isn't that I don't *like* being asked to your house——"

"Well, I was rather wondering whether to invite you again," murmured Gillian.

"Oh, but it's very good for me to be terrified occasionally."

"I didn't notice that you were." Gillian looked up, her eyebrows ironically aloft. "As far as I remember, when you came to supper last week you told us all about Jack the Ripper——"

"I was just keeping some sort of an end up." Annabel's grin at Miss Bryce was very nearly a wink. "In our family, the conversation's anything but intellectual." Her eyes indicated firmly to Miss Bryce that her contribution was due. After a pause, Miss Bryce seemed to decide that dignity might be compromised.

"In my family," she said brightly, "the conversation is mostly about golf."

They all laughed. The silence as Miss Bryce folded her paper was not unfriendly. "You can keep this, and read it for yourselves," she announced. She added to Gillian: "I'm sorry to be so irritable. It's stuffy in here, isn't it?"

"I'll open the window, may I?" said Annabel, jumping up.

"I'm sorry to be supercilious," said Gillian gravely.

She and Miss Bryce did not look at each other. Annabel glanced at them both as she tugged at the window cords and thought: Really, people are *difficult*. Thank heaven, the bell will go any moment now.

Margaret and Nicola were having a picnic luncheon in the dining-room; rolls had been tumbled from a paper bag on to a plate, cheese was in its cardboard box. Margaret, pouring coffee, remarked:

"I do hope Philippa is eating something for lunch."

"Oh, she'll last the day," Nicola assured her.

"I expect so. . . . But she was in a state this morning, poor child."

Nicola frowned. "She'd be all right if Annabel didn't chase her up like that," she said.

Margaret considered. "Well, I'm not sure about that. She really wanted to go to school this morning, you know."

"No accounting for tastes . . ." sighed Nicola, peeling tinfoil from a section of cheese. "You know," she broke out, "it was most terribly nice of Aubrey to go to all the trouble of changing those seats."

"I hope you enjoy the show," said Margaret non-committally.

"Oh, I know we shall. Only I just don't like being in the stalls for ballet, do you?"

She beamed at her mother. Aubrey's telephone call this morning had restored all her serenity, and with it, her ability to sympathise with the unserenity of others. Conjecturing now that her mother was still brooding over Philippa, she said:

"Pip'll be all right, you know. She just wakes up a bit goofy nowadays; she gets over it soon enough if people don't shriek at her."

"Oh, yes. . . . I suppose she does, on each occasion."

"But it doesn't help to treat the Kid as if she was mental."

"I don't——"

"No, no, I didn't mean you. I was thinking about Annabel. She has to be so frightfully hockey-captain with her, and it only puts Philippa in some more of a dither."

"Oh, not necessarily," said Margaret quickly. She had been thinking over this question in the course of the morning, and now, correcting her own private misgivings, she expressed herself with some earnestness. "People like Philippa need a bit of stiffening; it doesn't help her at all if people are just sorry for her."

"H'm. That's all very well. But the trouble with Annabel is, she's never sorry for anybody."

"Oh, Nico, that's a bit sweeping, c'arling."

"Well, she isn't, you know. Sometimes she reminds me of a miniature Lady Macbeth."

Margaret laughed. Yes, she could quite see Annabel saying: "Give me the daggers!" She was amused nowadays, too, by the authority with which Nicola talked about her sisters; her new status of betrothed-woman seemed to have advanced her to that of aunt. Laying-down-the-law was by no means peculiar to Annabel. However, there was something in what she said.

"But, Nico," she said, "you must admit that Annabel has a good deal of common sense."

"Oh, yes," conceded Nicola, without enthusiasm, as if Margaret had pointed out that Annabel wore woollen underwear. "But you know, she's a bit tiresome. She thinks she knows all about everything."

About to query this, Margaret looked across at Nicola with veiled interest. There had been something else behind that rather resentful remark. "... Such as what?" she asked casually.

"Oh, I don't know." Nicola stirred her coffee for a while, and then murmured: "I don't think she likes Aubrey very much."

Margaret was startled, but said nothing at once. She

could not remember studying Annabel's attitude to Aubrey, nor could she see why, or how much, this should affect Nicola. The skein of relationships, inter-plaiting itself under her eyes, wove a more and more complex tangle—no, there was nothing complex about this, she told herself sharply. She said aloud: "Eat that other roll. . . . What makes you say that?"

"I don't quite know."

"Do you mean that she isn't sorry for him?" prodded Margaret, laughing.

"Oh, I hope he isn't in need of her pity. . . . No, really, I don't know what I mean. After all, *I'm* going to marry him. I should be a lot crosser if she liked him too much—I suppose?"

"I suppose. It's funny, though; I think I know what it feels like. You want everybody to think that Aubrey is the most worthy gentleman in the world——"

"Of course I don't. Don't be silly."

"But Nicola, you're being a bit silly yourself, you know. I'm sure Annabel likes Aubrey very much. And he likes her, doesn't he?"

"Oh, yes—I think so. Well, I've never actually asked him in so many words."

"Why not?"

"Well, why should I?"

"Why should you wonder whether she likes him, then?"

"I don't know. Don't you really want that other roll? I shall get fat. . . . I was thinking about Philippa, too, I suppose. I do think Annabel's too tough with her. Don't you, really?"

"She's certainly tougher than I am; but I don't say that that is a bad thing."

"But she carries it to rather a length."

"I shouldn't say so; one must judge by results."

"What results?"

"Well, one's own feelings aren't always the best guide."

"You sound like a pious poker-work calendar."

"All right, I do." Margaret whipped the lid off the coffee-pot, scowled at the contents, clapped the lid on again, and said; "But the fact remains, that it was Annabel who got Philippa off to school this morning, while all I could do to help was drip tears into the child's breakfast."

Nicola gave her a quick, apprehensive glance.

Margaret did not catch the glance, but deduced its quality from Nicola's silence. She stood up and strolled to the window. "Well, my dear," she said over her shoulder, "the time may come when you will be grateful for a sister with clear-sighted common sense."

"Thank you, I'd rather rely on my own. But I daresay poor Philippa might be grateful—or, I wonder."

"I think she is, you know."

"Oh. Well, yes, she is a bit moony nowadays; but it wouldn't do if she were just bounced out of it. . . . Was I as impossible as that at her age?"

"I don't clearly remember; but I don't think so. Nor was Annabel."

"Oh, *her*."

Nicola was piling together their cups and plates; Margaret was staring out of the window at the fog-dwindled pear-trees of the garden. After a while she said practically:

"So you will be out for dinner, and so will Annabel. And Daddy might stay at the Club—he hasn't telephoned yet."

"You and Philippa will be able to have a cosy snack together."

This was just what had been in Margaret's mind, but of course she was not prepared to admit it. Instead she asked impulsively:

"Is there anything wrong at school? Do you know?"

"With Philippa? What kind of anything?"

"Well . . . has she quarrelled with someone? Or has she got one of these adorations for a mistress or a senior?"

"I'm sorry, she hasn't confided in me if so. It's no use pumping me."

"I was not——" began Margaret indignantly.

But Nicola added: "Oh, wait a minute—I don't know if this is enough to make her go all languishing, but in her bath the other night she was asking whether I thought a science degree was a good basis for a career."

"Science?" echoed Margaret incredulously. "Philippa?"

"That's what I thought. I gathered it was something about Miss Barlow—the chemistry hag."

"Barlow?" echoed Margaret again. "I don't remember her."

"Nor do I, particularly; she came just the year before I left. You'd better get Annabel's brilliant common sense on to the matter if you want to know any more."

"Chemistry!" muttered Margaret disconsolately. "Oh, heavens."

"Is that worse than anything else?"

"Well . . . it's a subject that I always hated," admitted Margaret unawares. "What's this Miss Barlow like?"

"Oh . . . all right, I think. You'll be able to see her at the Parents' Reception, won't you?"

"Lord, I suppose so. Those dreadful functions. I can't remember the date at the moment, but I've got the invitation in my desk. . . . Do you think that's really the trouble?"

"It's only a suggestion."

"Poor Philippa . . ."

"She'll get over it. Do you remember my agonies of heart over Miss Holland?"

"No; who was she?"

"You see, you don't even remember."

Margaret was not sure whether this was meant as encouragement or reproof. She touched the bell for Kitty to remove the plates, and said briskly:

"Well, I'm going to the hairdresser at two-thirty. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Just sit, I expect. Where did you say Annabel was going tonight?"

"To Corinne's, evidently. It's Corinne's birthday."

"I rather like Corinne. Do you?"

"Yes—she's a nice creature."

"Well, she's another of these scientists, did you know?"

"I suppose I did, but what difference does that. . . ?"

"You didn't seem to want Philippa to get interested in chemistry——"

"Nicola, don't exaggerate. I said nothing of the kind. Philippa must do whatever she likes. . . . How old is Miss Barkow?" she added almost involuntarily.

"Oh, I've no idea; thirty-ish."

"Oh."

Nicola jumped from the table and stretched her arms. "I hope," she said, with apparent irrelevance, "that I have sons instead of daughters."

Margaret pondered this. "I would not change what I have," she said seriously.

"H'm," said Nicola.

The fog clung round the school building, deadening and diffusing what light there was. In the staff dining-room the skylight windows were squares of tissue paper glued on the ceiling. Sago pudding was sodden tissue paper glued to the plates.

". . . but you can't call the Druids nationalistic," Miss Pearce was saying across the table. "At least, if you mean those spectacled gentlemen who drape themselves in sheets."

"What is it, then?"

"Provincialism, tempered by traditionalism and the——"

"It's always the same on a Tuesday," cut in Miss Turnbull's voice. "I wish something could be done about it. Pearce, do you think——?"

Heather Barlow was more interested in Druids than in Miss Turnbull's Tuesdays. She cut in herself, firmly:

"But Miss Pearce, surely the nationalistic spirit has to move with the times and re-attach itself—look at Scotland——"

"She's only analysing nationalism," said Miss Swann grimly. "There's no argument for disposing of it."

"No, but there's the question of the purpose of it."

"Pearce, did you hear what I said?" persisted Miss Turnbull. "I do think something should be done . . ."

Miss Bryce joined in from farther down the table. "Yes, I was going to ask about that, Miss Pearce. You see, when the lower forms have recreation in the gym, and straight after that——"

Heather reflected, rather caustically, that it is always the poor disciplinarians who have most to say on the topic of discipline. Of course there was always a pile-up on the main staircase on a Tuesday after recreation; there always had been. The only thing for the duty mistress to do was to hang over the banisters and glare horribly and hope for the best. No doubt some other arrangement might be made, but, at the expense of pleasant examination of contemporary nationalism, it did not seem worth it. Heather spooned up her pudding, swallowed stickily, and excused herself.

This was only the end of January; term did not finish till almost the end of March. And before then, one would somehow have to struggle through weeks of teaching, examinations, the Choral Society Concert, the Parents' Receptions . . . "I wish," said Heather to herself as she wandered out of the dining-room, "I'd taken up archaeology

and attached myself to some earnest but absent-minded professor, so that I could spend all my time lazing in the sun on the ruins of a temple while he dug away on the other side. . . .” This pleasing picture cheered her until she reached the passage outside the chemistry laboratory and saw one of her Science Sixth apparently boiling up some witches’ brew at the demonstration bench. Heather pounced.

“June! What *are* you doing? I left that apparatus up for——”

“Oh—hello, Miss Barlow. I thought you were trying to crystallise this, you see, but when I looked at it I saw that you hadn’t mixed the solutions—so I thought I’d do it again—I’m sorry if it’s wrong?”

“No,” said Heather gloomily. “Of course it’s not wrong. I am a double-dyed fool, and it’s time I got the sack. Thank you so much.” She dropped on to her stool behind the bench. “How’s it coming now?”

“It seems all right,” said June modestly.

“Looks very good to me. You’ve saved my face with the Lower Five, anyway.”

June and her accomplice, Corinne Baker, laughed deprecatingly. “We’d really nothing better to do,” said Corinne.

“I thought it was Upper Hockey day?”

“No, cancelled. Supposed to be too foggy. Can we do anything else for you while we’re here?”

“Well, you might just glance round and see what else I’ve made a pig’s ear of,” suggested Heather hopefully. “Do you want to work in here this afternoon, if you aren’t going to hockey? You can have the back bench.”

“Well, we had that volumetric to do. . . . Actually I rather thought I might slope off early-ish.” Corinne eyed Heather cautiously.

“Did you, indeed?”

“Well, it’s her birthday,” put in June kindly.

"Many happy returns."

"Thank you, Miss Barlow."

"So as a birthday present, I write a note asking Miss Daly to excuse you from indoor games, and then allow you to excuse yourself from extra science?"

"That sounds a bit unscrupulous . . ."

"That's what I thought." Heather adjusted the flame of the Bunsen and added: "However, do just as you please, by all means. I was just thinking how nice it would be not to be in this school any more; so if you'll promise to write me a testimonial wherewith I can apply for a new job——"

"We'll write you a corker; in blank verse," said Corinne generously.

"Heroic couplets might be better . . ." Heather glanced up to account for the other shadow that had been lingering between her and the light, and saw Philippa Goodwin, overall-clad, bearing a double handful of crucibles. "Yes, Philippa?"

"I wanted to show you these, Miss Barlow; I've got them clean."

"So you have, b'jove! Are those the ferric-oxide ones?"

"Yes, Miss Barlow."

"Splendid." Heather fingered the snowy porcelain appreciatively. "Well done—'hat must have been rather a toil."

"I liked doing it," said Philippa shyly. She added in the same breath: "Pat did the flasks . . ." and stood aside while Pat produced her handiwork.

"Oh, good; thank you, both of you," said Heather. She hoped her gratitude sounded as sincere for Pat as it had been for Philippa; but whereas one was inclined to believe Philippa when she said: "I liked doing it", one was daunted by that insufferable smirk on Pat Barr's face. Perhaps Heather, when she chose her new volunteer lab-boys at the beginning of this term, had wanted to compensate herself—she had known that she really must have

Pat sooner or later, so had selected Philippa to make up for it; and she had rather wanted to have Philippa, so had selected Pat to punish herself for this. But in any case, the lab-boys were not much in evidence; only at moments like these, in odd dinner-hours, they hung about cleaning and tidying stray equipment. And what kick they could get out of it, heaven knew, Heather mused as she lit a cigarette at her Bunsen.

Annabel, appearing in the doorway, might have been able to explain a little of the satisfaction the lab-boys found here. The laboratory, in spite of the scattering of angular equipment and the inevitable slightly leaking tap of the Kipps' Apparatus, had a cosily informal air; the little group round the blue Bunsen flame was pleasantly sociable. She felt almost an intruder.

"Excuse me, Miss Barlow. . . . I was looking for Corinne."

Heather watched the two seniors idly as they talked at the end of the bench; she saw Annabel, after a few moments, catch sight of Philippa, and look again at her with some surprise. When she had finished her conversation with Corinne, she called:

"Philippa, have you been up to dinner?"

"Yes."

Annabel gave her sister a long, penetrating look before she went out of the room; it was a look that contained inquiry, warning, comprehension. Philippa, catching Heather's eyes, blushed faintly.

"Are you in the habit of cutting dinner?" Heather asked her.

"Oh, no . . . no. Only, you see, I didn't have time for much breakfast this morning. So I expect Annabel wondered . . ."

"I see. She looks after you, does she?"

"Sometimes," said Philippa distantly.

"Gosh, it must be awful having a prefect for a sister,"

said Pat Barr. Corinne, June, and Philippa all stared at her for a second with non-recognition; she was uncrushed by this.

Heather, pivoting on her stool, asked Philippa in aside: "Do you oversleep in the mornings?" There was more anxiety than curiosity behind her question.

"Sometimes," said Philippa again, warily, her eyes lowered.

"Lazy beast," threw in Pat gaily.

"Pat," said Heather, "I wonder if you would go to the Staff-room and ask someone to give you a cup of coffee for Miss Barlow?" She watched Pat's obliging retreat with satisfaction. Philippa, leaning on the bench, added: "I don't *mean* to be lazy."

"No," agreed Heather meditatively.

"But sometimes I——" Philippa broke off, as if she had just noticed to whom she was speaking, and stood up. "Shall I do those test-tubes now, Miss Barlow?"

Heather almost refused, then decided that perhaps the occupation would be welcome. "That would be kind of you," she said.

Philippa gathered up the rack of test-tubes and fled; Corinne turned back and said:

"I think I'd really better go to indoor games, Miss Barlow. Annabel said she can come and help me get my party ready, so I need not go home so early."

"All right," said Heather mechanically, not remembering what all that was about. She was watching Philippa, and wondering what it was like in fact to have Annabel for a sister; and wondering what it was that Philippa had been about to say; and also, thinking how entirely useless affection could be when it cropped up in the wrong place.

She stared beyond Philippa at the log-whitened windows, and sank into an agreeable coma of self-pity, mingled with hard constructive thought about this afternoon's lesson, and a confused wonder that this particular

brand of self-pity should be so agreeable. "Like a Romantic poet," she said aloud.

"I beg your pardon?" said June, turning. *

"Nothing . . . 'For cruel 'tis', said she, 'To take my basil-pot away from me' . . . Good heavens . . ." She had just understood what was the matter with Philippa; but it would take too long to explain the whole thing to June.

"Your coffee, Miss Barlow," said Pat Barr at her shoulder.

Corinne's 'party' was, on this occasion, only a small family affair; but she was glad that Annabel arrived in good time, to act as scullery-maid. It happened in the Baker household that it was considered a privilege to do the cooking; as a rule, Mrs Baker monopolised the stove. So tonight Corinne, heroine of the hour, was in a pinafore, stirring a sauce nervously, while her mother acted hostess in the drawing-room.

"It's going lumpy . . . lumpy . . ." Corinne was muttering feverishly, plying her wooden spoon. "Oh dear, and I did want to surprise Mother. . . . Well, I expect I shall," she added resignedly. "Annabel, ducks, Mrs Brown was going to wash the best fruit-glasses for me—they ought to be on the slab in the larder. . . ."

Annabel went to look. "Yes, and two tins of grape-fruit laid out alongside—shall I distribute?"

"Would you, please? But put on a pinnie first—there's one on the back of the door. The tin-opener's in the drawer."

Annabel contemplated the eleven different drawers in various parts of the kitchen, and began a diligent search. At the third drawer she was successful. "It all smells wonderful," she said encouragingly as she spooned out the grape-fruit. "I shouldn't begin to know how to roast a chicken, myself."

"Oh, you just bung it in the oven," explained Corinne absently. "That part's easy enough. . . . Can Nicola cook?"

"Nico? More or less. Why?"

"I was just thinking that it might be quite a useful thing to know if one gets married."

"Well, she seems more interested in her clothes, so far."

"Do they know where they are going to live?"

"They keep talking about looking at flats; they have a fancy for Hampstead-ish at the moment."

"And will Nicola have to do all the skivvying, or can Aubrey afford some help—if they can get it?"

"I really haven't asked. . . . Eight glasses; is that right?"

"Yes—no, wait a moment: Mother, Daddy, you, me, Terry, Richard, Carol . . . that's only seven, isn't it? Oh dear, I am getting in a flap."

"Yes, that's seven, and stop flapping. Shall I put these on the table?"

Corinne nodded. "Yes, please. . . . Will they all go on the tray?"

They wouldn't; only a small tray seemed to be available, but Annabel unhurriedly made two journeys. The dining-room was, by day, Mr Baker's waiting-room; the arrangements of this house were complicated because the surgery, waiting-room, and Terry's room all had to be on the ground floor, so what was called, for occasions like this, the 'drawing-room' was really Terry's room with his draughtsman's equipment and personal effects stuffed into cupboards as opposed to the 'sitting-room' upstairs; and the dining-room was the waiting-room with its armchairs carried through into Terry's room, and the (remarkably up-to-date) copies of *Punch* and *Pictur* *ist* stuffed under the sideboard. With lace table-mats, well-polished silver, and a centre-piece of potted white hyacinths, the room looked very elegant this evening. Annabel reported this to

Corinne, in order to encourage her; but Corinne's spirits were already rising, as the lumps had dispersed from the sauce, and Richard and Carol, the other guests, could be heard arriving (at the back door, after the habit of many of the Bakers' purely social callers). Annabel, making her second trip with glasses of grape-fruit, found the dining-room unexpectedly in darkness, even the light of the electric fire fading before her eyes. As she hesitated on the threshold a voice from the gloom said: "One moment . . ."

There was a scrabbling of plugs from the hearth, the click of a switch, and the room was lit again—this time by the rainbow colours of the lights that played on the white hyacinths in the table centre. Terry hoisted himself upright in his chair to study the effect.

"Was just fitting the adaptor plug. . . . That's rather merry, don't you think?"

"Oh, Terry, it's lovely. What have you done—used the fairy lights from the Christmas decorations?"

"Hullo," he said, surprised, "I thought you were Ma Brown. Why are you disguised in her overall?"

"Corinne kindly lent it to me." She put down her glasses, still admiring the centre-piece. "Oh, I see—you've covered the flexes with those leaves. What a good idea."

"Not very brilliant in the electrical sense, though—would you put on the switch by the door again? That's better; thank you. We may as well be able to see what we're eating."

"And the fairy lamps still show on the flowers," pointed out Annabel approvingly. "I like those blue ones."

Terry wheeled himself towards the door. "You don't look like Mrs Brown any more, I'd better hasten to say; it was only the frontage——"

"Well, thank you. I wasn't awfully flattered."

"In fact, you look like a page from *Vogue*. Is that better?"

"Much. Thank you."

Terry was in one of his happier moods, evidently. Annabel grinned at him as she straightened the chairs. He went on gravely: "I'm glad I put on my best rug in the party's honour."

"It's a very handsome one," she agreed, as he smoothed the green plaid over his knees. She risked: "It matches your tie."

"Complete gents' outfitting. How's Corry getting on? Rum idea of a party, I call it. But I suppose it keeps her quiet."

Annabel laughed. "I think she's quite happy; she was just basting away at the chicken. And, did you hear, Richard and Carol have arrived?"

"Oh? I'd better bowl along. You come too; leave that girl to her swink. . . . Chicken, did you say? I didn't know that."

"Have I given away a surprise?"

"Well, I'd anticipated it really. The staple party dinner."

"I suppose it is." She stood back for a scrutiny of the table. "Shall we leave your centre-piece alight? . . . Yes, we always seem to have chicken too, when there's anything to be celebrated." Something in this last remark reminded her. . . . She paused, staring doubtfully at Terry.

"Oh?" he said.

The flow of time was checked, and memories caught up, jarring, like goods trucks on a railway line. Annabel thought: No, I won't talk to him about Aubrey—why should I?

Yet she felt an obligation to do so; not that she could clearly remember at the moment why she must, but this confused and insistent memory of earlier worry compelled her. She said urgently, awkwardly:

"You remember once—last term—you said that you

knew my future brother-in-law? Aubrey Powell-Duncan? No, not that you actually knew him, but you knew something about him. . . ."

"Did I?"

She hesitated, fidgeting with her tray. "At Oxford," she went on at last, temporising.

"I seem to recall the name." He was unhelpful.

"I don't really want to ask. . . . Well, I've just been worried, you see." But it seemed too long a story to explain now. She said quickly: "I didn't want to know if there was anything about him that . . . that Nicola might not like. Only, in a way, I just wondered. . . . It might not be important, but I did want to get it straight in my mind, because I've been thinking about it so much."

"About what?"

"About what you told us. That he got into some kind of trouble."

"Powell-Duncan?"

"Yes. I didn't like it, you see—it's been rather on my mind."

"So what can I do about that?"

"Well . . . I don't know, really. I just wondered if you'd tell me again—what you said —"

"I should have thought that would increase the weight on your mind?"

"Well, yes . . . if it really was like you said——"

"You mean that I might have made it all up?"

"Oh, no. No."

"You believed me?"

"Yes, of course," she said earnestly. She was not enjoying this conversation.

"So you want me to repeat myself? Or contradict myself? And if I did so, would you believe me in that case?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"Suppose you tell me what I did say," he suggested grimly.

"Oh . . . it doesn't matter, really." She caught his eye and made an effort. "Well, you just said that Aubrey and some of his friends, at Oxford, were nearly sent down because they threw another man over Magdalen Bridge or somewhere."

"Oh, yes; I remember. I'm sorry to have worried you. I'd have kept quiet if I knew you would take it to heart so."

"No, I'm glad you didn't——"

"It doesn't sound like it."

"Oh, I don't mean that I'm pleased to know the story—but don't you think it's just as well to know unpleasant things?"

"What does your sister say—is she as worried?"

"She doesn't know—at least, I certainly haven't told her."

"But you just said it was as well to know——"

"Oh, not for *her*. That's different."

"Why?"

"Well, she's engaged to him."

"You think that therefore his past won't matter to her."

"It would matter much more, surely."

"Yet she doesn't worry about his undergraduate behaviour?"

"Well, she might, you see. That's why I thought I'd like to find out the real —I mean, just what happened."

"I can't see that it has anything to do with you."

"No, perhaps it hasn't." Annabel seized this as dismissal, and turned towards the door. But Terry added:

"—And much less to do with me. But I suppose I should apologise for worrying you."

"It wasn't only you," she said candidly. "Do you know, when you hear a rumour about someone, it does rather make you look at them in the light of it. . . . Well, I do feel bothered about Aubrey, privately. So I just wondered what you really thought——"

"I should think that is the last thing you want to know. And I don't like being called a rumour-monger."

"I didn't call you that," she retorted with spirit.

"It sounded uncommonly like it. Why should I be interested in blackening the poor chap's good name?"

"I don't know why you should. Anyway, you didn't."

Terry sighed.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Annabel, before he could speak again. "I began all this back to front, didn't I? It wasn't how I meant to say it at all. Please don't be angry." She uttered this last plea so anxiously that he grinned.

"I am. Very angry."

"Yes, I suppose you are. . . . I'd better go back and help Corinne."

"Perhaps you had. And look here," he added with a return to curtness, "don't let me tell you any more funny stories if this is how you take them."

"It wasn't funny; not to me, anyway."

"Well, I can't be responsible for your Sixth-form sense of decorum."

"I hope Sixth forms haven't a monopoly of human kindness."

"Don't be so pompous."

"Well, don't be so acid," returned Annabel unguardedly.

"I'm afraid I don't react very favourably to your hints."

"What hints?"

"You suggest," he told her distantly, "that I chose to malign a stranger—presumably for my own secret satisfaction."

"I suggested nothing of the kind. I'm not interested in your motives either."

"Perhaps I'm not interested in Powell-Duncan's."

"I can see that. Otherwise you might be a bit more . . ."

"More what?"

"I was going to say, helpful; but it doesn't matter."

"No, it's useless to expect me to be helpful."

"Oh, don't *keep* taking things the wrong way."

"Touchy, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are."

They glared at each other, Annabel clutching the tray against Mrs Brown's pinafore, Terry leaning back in his chair, the pinched shadows rippling against his nostrils. She took a step back, involuntarily, wondering in sudden alarm how she could be squabbling with Terry like this—in a voice that could probably be heard in the next room. She drew a long breath and said levelly:

"I'm very sorry. We had better drop the subject."

"As you wish. But what subject? Of my touchiness?"

"Among others, yes."

She had forgotten, for the moment, what other topics had been under discussion; she was aware only of Terry, and his white commanding face. His eyes drove against hers, dark and glittering; it was with an almost physical wrench that she turned away and hurried back to the kitchen.

"Oh, Corinne . . ." she breathed, closing the door behind her. "I am a viper in the nest. . . . I've been saying the most awful things to Terry." She wondered at once whether she should have pouched out the woe like that; but Corinne, placidly powdering her nose at the mirror above the sink, said:

"Good for you."

"Yes, but—I'm sorry. I don't want to . . . to upset him, especially just before a party——"

"I shouldn't worry." Corinne turned back and studied her for a moment. "Was he being tiresome?"

"I started it. . . . I was asking him again about that story he told us—about Aubrey."

"Aubrey? Oh, yes; I remember. But I thought you would have forgotten."

"I wish I had." Annabel leaned on the table, untying

her pinafore. "And I've wasted so much time, and left you with all the dishing-up——"

"That's okay. Don't look so anguished! Terry isn't nearly as savage as he sounds."

Annabel looked at her doubtfully. Quite possibly, Corinne was just soothing her; or, possibly, she was really not concerned by Terry's mood at this moment. Culinary achievement might have nerved her? As if reading this thought, Corinne said:

"Listen, don't go spoiling your evening on Terry's account! It does him a power of good to be snapped at occasionally. I wish I did it more often."

"Oh, but, it's not as if he—not like other people . . ." She checked herself. Corinne, playing with the oven door, observed:

"He's exactly like other people from the sternum upwards."

"Yes. . . . That isn't what I meant."

"No. I know. But he'll cheer up—Richard always makes him laugh. Honestly, don't worry. You've gone quite pale."

Annabel inspected herself in the mirror. "H'm. Well, you know, I am a bit scared of him. . . ."

"I bet you aren't really," said Corinne robustly.

"Oh, but I am."

"You aren't scared of anybody."

"Lord. I am, you know. All these sensitive people—they put me in a dither."

"Such as who else?" Corinne began to load a tray from the oven.

"Oh, I don't know. . . . Gillian, for instance."

"Really? But she's so gentle at heart."

"Yes, she is. . . . I don't know what made me mention her—Oh, yes, she had the beginnings of a scrap with little Bryce today. What an excitable day it seems to have been!"

"I'm sure it was little Bryce who did the scrapping."

"Yes, she did—heavens, there's a touchy type for you if you like!"

"She must be a pain in the neck. I'm glad she doesn't teach me. Actually, I think we get spoilt with Barlow. We tell her where she gets off all along the line——"

"You work for her, though," said Annabel, over a vegetable dish.

"Like stink. June says——"

"Oh, yes!" interrupted Annabel. "I knew there was something else I wanted to ask you. What's Philippa doing hanging about the chemistry lab? I haven't seen her there before."

"Haven't you? She's been around there a lot lately. Didn't I tell you? Smitten, I expect."

"Miss Barlow?"

"I suppose so. Why not?"

"I dunno; just surprised. . . . Chemistry doesn't seem much in her line, somehow."

"Well, that's only the secondary attraction, I daresay—I want that spoon for the gravy, don't put it away."

"Sorry. . . . Aren't the young unpredictable?"

"Philippa probably is. I like Barlow, though."

"Yes. Shall I take the tray?"

"Thank you—and you might ring the bell on your way back."

Annabel rang a little apprehensively, and waited in the hall as the 'party' emerged from Terry's room. But it seemed that Corinne had been right about Terry's mood of this evening; he was quite cheerful again. Richard certainly was able to make him laugh; he made everyone laugh, for that matter. She enjoyed the dinner, and the communal washing-up.

Once or twice, she noticed Terry watching her with a not unfriendly expression, and she hoped that she was on the way to being forgiven. Even so, she was surprised, when

she was about to leave, to hear him say: "Allow me to walk with you to the bus stop."

"Thank you," she said, cautiously. The ironical use of the word 'walk' might indicate anything. But, it turned out, he did mean to accompany her for a little of her walk home. They went without speaking out of the back door, down the low ramp that had been built under the step for the passage of Terry's chair. She opened the garden gate for him, and walked briskly beside his chair along the pavement. This was the first time she had been with him out of doors; it was a strange feeling; it seemed as if she ought to have been pushing him, but the powerful hands on his wheels kept him moving at a very fair speed, and silently. The fog had lifted a little, and the night was mild. Spreading blots of milky light hung round the street-lamps.

"Look here," said Terry, after they had travelled some yards, "don't get yourself into a state about that nonsense."

"About . . . Aubrey, you mean?"

"Yes. It was a long time ago, and nothing important. And I apologise for raking it up." He spoke formally, staring ahead.

"It was my fault—I raked it up this time. And I didn't know in the least what I really wanted you to say——"

"I see. You were not hoping to find out that I had been actuated only by natural spleen——"

"No, no," she said quickly. She almost added that she had not cared at all about Terry's part in the matter, but did not. Somehow, they had come to grief over that issue earlier. She hurried on: "But you see, I just thought it was something not to Aubrey's credit, and it worried me know it, and I really wondered what to do."

"Forget it."

"I tried to."

"Well, try again." Terry halted his chair at the edge of

the pavement corner, and Annabel turned to face him. He lay back and placed his fingers together, as composedly as if he were still by the fireside. "It wasn't Magdalen Bridge, I've remembered," he said. "Which ought to be a consolation; because anyone chucked over there would quite likely crack his skull; the water isn't deep. That particular incident occurred, I believe, on Folly Bridge; the water is very deep there, and what's more, someone picked the little chap up at once in a boat. Is that better?"

She smiled wanly. "Well, it wasn't actually that that worried me."

"Then what on earth *did*?"

"It was what you said about . . . the way they harassed him."

"I dare say he deserved it."

"But why?"

"Oh, I can't answer for the huntin' instincts of British boyhood. Use your imagination."

"That's what I try not to."

"H'm. Perhaps you're right. But listen, my child; do bear in mind that I'm talking about a men's college, not a girls' boarding-school."

Annabel slowly shook her head, thinking. She saw that she would not find, in Terry, the particular guidance that she needed. He seemed to look at the matter either practically—someone had been thrown over a bridge, but that was a long time ago and no harm had been done, so why worry—or else he looked at it from his own difficult, spiky, personal point of view, which she could not understand, and of which she was rather afraid.

I think I must talk to Corinne about it, she decided.

"What was his name?" she asked suddenly. "It wasn't really Egg?"

"No, I don't suppose so. But I forget. Addleton, or something."

"Oh. Well . . . thank you. Don't let me keep you in the cold——"

"But your sister's perfectly happy, isn't she?" demanded Terry unexpectedly.

"Oh, yes. Very. You see," she added in sudden confidence, "that's rather worrying, in its way; she is so frightfully in love that she seems positively . . ." She hesitated; Terry supplied:

"Deficient in judgement?"

"No—not as bad as that."

"But you feel responsible for her."

"I do, in a way," she admitted, before she had noticed his expression; then, after glancing at his face, she said crossly: "I suppose it's funny. All right. But it might not be, in the end."

"You don't really suppose that Powell-Duncan, having presumably outgrown his undergraduate behaviour, is still likely to throw his wife over Folly Bridge?"

"Oh, no; don't be silly . . . I *told* you it wasn't that. But really—if a person can be a bully at a certain age, is he certain to grow out of it? Is it the kind of thing one grows out of?"

"I can't offer you any generalisations on the subject. Does it seem an important failing, to you?"

"Yes, it does. Very. You see, it—any kind of deliberate cruelty—seems to me to show a kind of selfishness. A dangerous kind of selfishness. Even if it doesn't always show."

"No wonder you worry, you know, if you insist on depicting human nature in such sweeping terms."

"Are they sweeping? I'm only saying that that's how it seems to me, personally."

"I should have thought you knew Powell-Duncan pretty well by now; doesn't that soothe you?"

"I don't know him at all well. I don't think any of us do, really."

"How odd."

"Well, of course, Nicola does—but I wonder."

"Do you think she knows about this incident that you regret so earnestly?"

"Well, she might; but I shouldn't think so. And of course I wouldn't tell her."

"Wouldn't you? What if you thought she was going to marry a bully?"

"Well, then I should—I think. Yes, I do think I should have to. But I'm not at all sure that he is a bully."

"You seemed fairly well convinced hitherto." Terry was still faintly amused.

"That was where I thought you might help me," ~~she~~ put in aptly.

"Oh. I see. You wanted me to tell you just what kind of a bloke this poor Powell-Duncan was?"

"I . . . Yes, I suppose I wanted your opinion."

"How thoroughly feminine. You propose to do something on principle, so you must have personal authority for it."

"Not authority really; evidence," she insisted, undaunted.

"But I told you; I didn't know the man. You could ask our cousin Bridget, who told me about it."

"I might. Do you know her address in South Africa?"

"Well; you are prepared to go to lengths, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. Listen, Terry, I know it's nothing to do with me in a way—but, you see, we don't really know much about him. He's awfully well-mannered and does well in his work, and so on—but we don't *really* know even about his family . . ."

"You don't, you mean?"

"I don't think even Nicola does. She said only a few days ago that it was time she met Aubrey's mother."

"Are you afraid that his mother, too, throws people over
br——?"

"Oh, I wish you'd be serious. Please. I know I'm showing vulgar curiosity and taking too much upon myself and anything else you *like*, but Terry, honestly . . ."

"I told you," he said distantly, "that I personally consider the matter trivial; and I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"Well, in a sense I consider the matter trivial too. But not its implications . . . Why did your cousin Bridget give him the chuck?" she remembered abruptly.

"Do you really want to know?" he countered after a pause.

"Yes. I think I'd better."

"Well, she was so disgusted by the way he and his friends treated that little pimple. Does that satisfy you?"

Annabel sighed. "All right. Thank you."

A car drifted along the road, its side lights pointing the shadow of Terry's chair along the pavement for a moment. When it had passed the road seemed quieter still. "I must go," she said. "Thank you for coming along with me."

"Not at all. Good night."

"Good night, Terry."

He swung his chair round, but checked himself as Annabel said:

"Why did you ask me if Nicola was happy?"

"I just wondered. . . . That, after all, is the main point. I don't see much relevance between a man's treatment of his ladylove and his treatment of a spotty little fellow-student."

"No. Not on the face of it. Oh, I must think. I don't know whether I make it up—but there is something kind of . . . well, hard, in Aubrey's face sometimes."

"I shouldn't be surprised. Are you in love with him yourself, by any chance?"

She laughed. "Good Lord, no."

"Well . . . think it over." He waved a hand and then moved away on his silent wheels. Annabel set off along the misty road, breaking into a run, partly from pressure

thought and partly at the recollection that she had still a great amount of work to do tonight. "Think it over", she repeated to herself as she turned into the next road. She took Terry's parting words to refer to the whole situation; his suggestion that she might be in love with Aubrey herself made no impression by comparison. Most chilling of all had been his remark about Bridget; Annabel knew that he had meant "the way he and his friends treated that little . . ." Just that; nothing in particular about a bridge.

But, she thought as she hurried on, her footsteps ringing on the empty pavements, it's just as well to talk about it to someone—even Terry. Heaven knows how I should build the whole thing up, otherwise. Shall I ask Corinne what she thinks? But I can't go round gossiping about Aubrey behind his back like that. . . . Shall I ask Aubrey about it? Perhaps that would be the best thing.

Oh, no; I can't say, "Did you once nearly get yourself sent down from Oxford for persecuting some little man called Egg? . . ." But obviously, he is the person to ask. Supposing it was none of it true.

But it must be. Still, it might not matter. . . . Nico might not mind in the least; I'm just interfering. That's all it is.

All the same. . . . Oh, I must think it over.

The fog had lifted a little; when Nicola and Aubrey came out of the restaurant where they had had supper after the ballet, Nicola said:

"Oh, let's walk."

"All the way?"

"All the way."

It was not very far in fact; they had already had a taxi journey from the theatre to this point. The theatre had been full of people, the restaurant full of people, and even another taxi would be full of a driver. But the streets were empty and veiled and quiet. Sometimes Nicola had a

feeling that she could not have explained to herself, everything except being alone with Aubrey was just a waste of time. It was as if they had *had* to watch the ball and ride in a taxi, and stuff themselves with lobster salad as a social duty; and now, the tiresome rites completed, they might relax. They might be themselves. She would have liked to sit down on the cool pavement and ignore the world.

There was even a purpose to it all; they had gone through all that ceremonial in order to achieve this solitude. Yet the purpose was obscure to her; she thought vaguely: When we're married . . . Then, it will be always like this; we shall be together when everyone else has gone home, when everyone else is in bed. . . . And we shall be able to stay together for as long as we like . . . till we go to sleep, till we wake up again. . . . The idea was both soothing and disturbing. She was both tired by the evening's enjoyment and revived by the night air. They strolled unhurriedly, their fingers twined together in Aubrey's overcoat pocket.

When we're married . . . repeated Nicola to herself, liking the half-frightening excitement of the phrase. She thought: In sickness and health—— but put those words away from herself quickly. The words of the marriage service could be used only once, she felt—they must be detonated at the right time, like a bomb. This idea she could not have explained to herself either; she felt that it was 'unlucky' to anticipate too closely; she felt that the idea of being always with Aubrey must not be examined fully until it was accomplished.

Aubrey, gripping her fingers, was thinking something along the same lines, but with more thoroughness. He wondered what Nicola was thinking about; he knew. But he was not surprised when she said in an assertive tone:

"That awful fatty who was the left leading swan . . ."

"Leading swan? Which were they? The little footlers?"

"No, those are the cygnets. . . . This was the one who couldn't do a 'ronde de jambes' properly."

"A how much?"

"Oh, you *know* . . ." She hummed the relevant passage of music.

"Don't remember. Must have been asleep at that point."

"Well you weren't."

"How do you know?"

"I just know, that's all. You're pretending to be dense."

"Go on about the fat lady?"

"Well, she was fat."

"Which one was this?"

"Aubrey, stop it. But she was a shocker, wasn't she?"

"M'm. What was it she couldn't do—a pirouette?"

"Well I'm sure she couldn't, but that isn't what I said."

"It's the only ballet word I know. I was just trying to seem clever."

"It isn't; you were talking about fouettés only a few days ago."

"Same thing, isn't it."

She allowed herself to be drawn. "Oh, you are *stupid*. No, of course not. . . . Hold my bag for a moment. . . ."

Under a street-lamp she demonstrated. "Pirouette with preparation in fourth—like this—see? I can't do it in a coat——"

"Let me hold your coat for you."

Her shadow spun, a velvet spider, across the strands of web thrown by the lamp bracket. Aubrey, watching with his arms full of beaver lamb, looked solemn, almost grim. He said:

"If you sprain your ankle I'm not carrying you home."

Nicola paused and looked at him; lamplight turned her eyes indigo, her skin to ivory. As he put on her coat they had both forgotten about pirouettes. "Carry me home," she murmured as his hands rested on her shoulders.

"Certainly not. . . . I wish I'd seen you in full ball rig."

"Blocks and tights? I'll dress up for you some time. . . . I've got the things at home still somewhere. . . . No, put me down. There's a policeman, he'll think I'm being abducted."

They turned into the square, crossed the road diagonally, walked for some length along the narrow pavement under the centre trees, and crossed again to the front steps of the house.

"It's quiet; are they all in bed?"

"Sometimes," said Nicola, puzzled, "the backs of my arms ache."

"Why?"

"I don't know." She held out her arms, and he took them, not too gently.

"Ow . . ."

"Did that hurt?"

"No. Yes, I liked it."

"Nico . . ."

"What?"

"You know."

"Tell me again."

"Glutton," he said into her throat.

"Yes, I am."

"Did that hurt?"

"I didn't notice. . . . Are you coming in?"

"What do you think? I don't know the time."

"For a little . . ."

"I've got a busy day tomorrow . . ."

"Never mind that."

"I don't, frankly."

"What do you smell of? It's nice. Is it shaving-cream or something?"

"Probably your own Chanel wafting back at you."

"Actually it's Goya. . . . What did you say just then?"

"Nothing. Darling, perhaps I won't come in."

"Why not?"

"Well . . ."

"I'll make you some coffee."

"I don't want your tooth-marks on my nose, thank you."

"Of course you do. I wonder if this is what they call jilling and cooing? Listen, do come in."

"I think we'd better move in some direction; the neighbours will be throwing buckets of water."

"I'd like that. Let go, and I'll fish for my key."

The hall was dark; a clock chimed from the drawing-room above as Nicola closed the door behind them. She groped for Aubrey, and was surprised by the strength of his arms. He did not speak, and she wriggled suddenly.

"Darling . . ."

"Coffee?" he said briskly, in a tone higher than his usual voice.

"Yes . . . come on . . ."

For some reason, they were both relieved to see a light under the kitchen door. Nicola broke away from Aubrey as if she had been afraid of him, saying: "Someone still up."

"Who can that be?"

"Annabel," she reported, throwing open the door.

"Oh, good," said Aubrey cheerfully.

At once, they were gay; they hustled into the room, laughing like late arrivals at a party.

"What are you doing up at this hour?"

"Beastly little swot."

"What're you drinking?"

"We've been to the ballet."

"And we're full of unchewed lobster."

"Have a cigarette?"

"No thanks," said Annabel, getting a word in at last. She was sitting at the kitchen-table, wearing her yellow-striped housecoat; before her was Ketelby's *History of Modern Times*, a pencil, a mug of cocoa, and four biscuits

laid out neatly in order of merit, ending with a chocolate one. She formed a complete and calm domestic interior, and turned in her chair to look in mild dazedness at the arrivals.

"Why are you up so late?" repeated Nicola, filling the kettle.

"Busy. Went to Corinne's this evening, you see, so have to catch up on this."

"Oh, so you did. Have a good time?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Watch that kettle, darling, I want to take my coat off. . . ." On which euphemism Nicola disappeared, banging the door heartily.

"She'll wake the house," said Annabel, with automatic severity.

"Yes, I'm afraid we are a bit exhilarated." Aubrey leaned on the dresser and took out his cigarette-case.

Annabel put her chin on her hand and scrutinised him. There was a silence.

"I suppose you have to work pretty hard?" said Aubrey, at last. It sounded rather as if it had taken him all that time to think of something to say; but he was watching Annabel with friendly interest. She was watching him intently, abstractedly. 'Exhilarated', she reflected, wasn't quite the word that she would have applied to him. Indeed, he looked tired; and a little gloomy.

"Oh, yes, rather," she said, recollecting his question.

Should she—ought she—she wondered swiftly, to ask him about what had been on her mind? No, it would sound silly. But she ventured, approaching indirectly:

"I expect I should have to work a good deal harder if I got into Oxford."

"Harder?" he echoed.

Annabel picked up her second biscuit—a digestive—and bit into it. "Did you work hard at Oxford?" she asked.

"I suppose so."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"I don't know," she answered, disconcerted. He frowned at her, slightly disconcerted too.

"You're going to read history, are you?"

She was bored by discussion of her affairs. "Did you like the ballet?" she asked conversationally.

"Yes, thank you. What did Nico want done with that kettle? It seems to be coming up to the boil."

"Was she going to make tea?"

"She said coffee."

"I'll do it. . . . Excuse me, the pot's just behind you on the shelf. . . ."

Aubrey could not understand why he suddenly found this child so difficult to talk to; he blamed it on his own mood, and tried to think of a more sustaining topic. Annabel, who was tired and had been cramming history with weary zeal, was caught in the kind of dither that affects one who cannot quite remember what she last said. What had they been saying about Oxford, and need they say more about it, or had they better? Nicola reappeared into this arid atmosphere. Heating milk in a saucepan, she leaned against the stove and wondered where their mood of cheerfulness had gone to.

"Nico's going to dress up as a ballerina for me some time," remarked Aubrey, as he took his cup.

"She looks nice in a ballet dress."

"I used to dance pretty well," stated Nicola. The boast fell like a boast into unreceptiveness.

"She was an R.A.D. scholar," added Annabel kindly.

"Well, that's not uncommon."

"Do you dance?" Aubrey asked Annabel.

"Me?" she took up, sharply, as if he had insulted her.

"No," she said after a pause.

Nicola glanced at her. "Philippa ought to," she observed. "Would build up her leg muscles."

"out She doesn't like it."

"But she ut she's quite musical."

"I think that's what puts her off."

"Plies to Beethoven."

"She ar went to Miss Hayward's for a while."

"But she wouldn't take any exams."

"Well, why should she? Miss Hayward thinks too much of her."

The conversation ticked, a heavy pendulum, between Nicola and Annabel. Annabel suddenly realised that she might be redundant.

"Well, I must go to bed——" She gathered up her book and pencil.

"I must go," said Aubrey. He stood up; Nicola followed him out of the room, her hand on his elbow. She came back sooner than Annabel had expected.

"Hullo," she said aimlessly, wandering over to lean on the dresser. Aubrey had left a box of matches there; she shook it as it was empty. He had wanted to go home, and, at the same moment, she had wanted him to go. They had understood each other on the dark doorstep, parting with only a light touch of the fingers. But now, back in the kitchen, Nicola was bewildered; almost desolate. Something was missing. They had toiled through that evening, through the theatre, the restaurant, towards being alone; and then it had happened.

Not a word. But what had she expected? She sighed, played with the empty matchbox, and looked sourly at Annabel.

"Sorry if I was in the way," said Annabel cautiously, noting the look.

Nicola found a grave. "Not at all," she said coldly, "but I think you might have been a bit more matey."

"Wasn't I?"

"You just looked glum as if we'd interrupted your swotting."

"Sorry."

"I suppose we had."

"I could have gone away."

"You might as well have. I think Aubrey's particularly nice to *you*. Why can't you be reasonably decent to him?"

Annabel jumped. She bent her head and played with her pencil. It might have been as well, she thought, if she *had* tackled Aubrey after all; had he said anything to Nico when they went upstairs? . . . Nicola said:

"Don't you like him?"

Her tone warned Annabel. She said mildly: "Yes, of course."

"You don't."

"I do, Nico."

"I don't care, anyway." Nicola threw the matchbox in the direction of the coke-hod. "But you needn't be so beastly smug."

"I'm not," contradicted Annabel mechanically. It seemed very hot in the kitchen, and very late at night. She fingered her book and leaned across the table.

"Yes, you are. You think you know best about everything."

Annabel bore this outrage commendably well. She stood up and said: "Well, I must go to bed."

"Don't ignore me like that."

"Well," less commendably, "you're only being silly."

"Am I, indeed? You see what I mean."

"No, I don't. And I don't want to."

"What *have* you got against Aubrey?"

"You don't want to know," retorted Annabel.

"Nothing," she amended quickly.

"You hate him."

"I *don't*. Why do you have to exaggerate like that——"

"So you admit at least that you don't like him?"

"Nico, I wish you'd go to bed. I don't see what all this fuss is about."

"I like that. You're making the fuss."

"Get out of my way. I'm going upstairs."

"You can't leave those cups for Kitty to clear up."

"They're your cups. I've put away my mug."

"All right, if you must be so trade-union. And next time you meet Aubrey—if he comes to this house again—try to be just a bit polite, will you?"

Annabel sighed. "There's nothing I could say that would keep Aubrey away from the house, and you know that as well as I do. Now good night."

"Exit the model prefect. Smug-puss. . . . You'd like to keep him away, though."

"Nico, do talk sense if you must talk. I like Aubrey. You know I do. Why should I keep him away?"

"I don't know. I expect you've just got it in for him."

"Why should I have?"

They faced each other for a moment across the table. Nicola narrowed her eyes, suddenly intent, as if peering through a fog. "You've never liked him. Why not?"

"I don't know anything about him, really," said Annabel wearily. "After all, I'm not going to marry him."

Nicola looked down at her left hand. The single diamond flashed red and green as she moved it under the light. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said rapidly. "I am being all kinds of a bloody fool. I don't know what's the matter. . . . I'm tired."

"I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to be upstage with Aubrey."

"Oh, that's all right. He wouldn't mind." She dropped her hand and asked idly: "Do you like him?"

"Yes. But I don't know very much about him, do I?"

"What else do you want to know?"

Annabel hesitated. "Oh . . . nothing. But it seems such a big thing, to spend all the rest of one's life with someone . . ."

"It depends on the person."

"Yes . . ."

"Actually, there are lots of things I don't know about him either. But I don't care."

"I know."

Nicola looked at her sharply. "What are you leading up to now?"

"Nothing at all. I just meant that . . . well for instance, he hasn't introduced you to his family, even."

"But I told you. He hasn't got a family. Only his mother, and a younger brother who's in Scotland."

"Yes. I've heard him mention his mother. . . . You'd have thought she would want to meet you?"

"She does. She wrote to me."

"Yes, I remember. Doesn't he get on very well with her?"

"As far as I know. Why?"

"That's all right. . . . Where exactly does she live?"

"In Shropshire. You know that. Are you hinting that he's horrid to his mother, or something?"

"Of course I'm not. Only, it seems a bit—well, I just wondered why he hasn't arranged for you to meet each other."

"As it happens, he has." Nicola began to collect the cups and spoons. "He is borrowing John's car and driving me down for the day on Sunday. Now are you satisfied?"

"Yes, of course," said Annabel. She made for the door. "Good night."

"And in future, you might refrain from interfering."

"I will. I'm sorry. Good night."

Nicola did not consciously tell herself that that announcement of her plans for the week-end had been curiously well-timed; or that the forming of the plan itself had come at a convenient juncture. She was aware only of a mild satisfaction in the crushing of Annabel; though,

as she washed out the coffee-cups before following her sister upstairs, her mood changed and lightened, until she began to wonder what she had been so very shrewish about, and then to feel ashamed of herself.

Talking inwardly to Aubrey, from natural habit, she climbed slowly through the darkened house. I was just in some kind of a stew. . . I hope I wasn't too, too utterly tiresome. . . . Daddy has been smoking cigars; I can smell it—no, I think that's Mr Willoughby's brand; he must have been in; I expect poor Mummy had a boring evening, if so . . . Well, I'm awfully sorry I was such a fool. I might say I'm sorry to Annabel. . . .

But the other bedroom was already in darkness. And I'd better not risk waking Philippa up, with all this fuss Mummy makes nowadays about the child's beauty-sleep. And anyway . . . I don't quite know what I would say to Annabel. . . .

She was not talking to Aubrey any more as she went into her own room and began to undress. She was trying to disentangle just what it was that she had said to Annabel, and why. Formal apologies were uncommon between the sisters, because, as in most families, any kind of formality was a symptom of estrangement, and so quarrels were terminated by more practical or negative means. The idea of apologising to Annabel had been suggested by a certain readjustment of the central situation; the element of a stranger in their midst—which was silly; Aubrey wasn't a stranger.

All the same, Nicola began to see unwillingly that she had chosen to accuse Annabel of disliking Aubrey for some entirely frivolous, and rather disingenuous, reason. She had almost *wanted* someone to say unpleasant things about him, so that . . . so that . . .

So that she herself need not?

She threw off the last of her clothes and surveyed her upper half in the dressing-table mirror. If I hadn't any

arms, she mused, I'd look just like Venus de Milo. . . . She tilted her body into what she imagined to be the statue's position, and her mind ran on relentlessly: I don't say that Aubrey's perfect, and thank heaven he's not—and he is taking me to see his mother.

Emotion had blown through her this evening in a complicated way, attacking from unexpected directions, like the wind in a tube station. She repeated to herself: I am going down to see Mrs Powell-Duncan . . . and turned to hunt for her nightdress. It was not only Annabel, perhaps, who had found the suggestion of this visit timely. It was tangled up with other—little, senseless—things that had been potentially more serious for being ignored. And little things, too, that were part of what she liked best about Aubrey; which was ridiculous.

Because Aubrey loved her best, she was the centre of his attention, and nothing could have been more gratifying. At the same time, his absorption in Nicola seemed to cut out other people—well, who could object to that? Certainly not Nicola.

But perhaps it was the things he had said from time to time about his family that had secretly worried her. It was nice, of course, when they were in some restaurant and Nicola said: "What a pretty girl over by the orchestra," and Aubrey barely troubled to glance round. It was nice, of course, when Nicola asked: "Aren't you going to play golf with Andrew this week-end?" and Aubrey said: "Andrew can play golf with himself; I've got more important things in mind." It was nice when Nicola said: "I've been asked to a tea-party by Mrs Ross, to meet some missionaries from the Gold Coast—" and Aubrey said: "Well, you can cut that, because I'm taking you out for a walk on Box Hill." But in a way it was less nice when Nicola said: "Your mother says, won't I go down and stay for a few days?" and Aubrey said: "Well, you won't. I can't spare you."

Of course, no one wanted to be spared. But that whole question of the visit to Mrs Powell-Duncan had hung fire for so long.

"She said," Nicola had resumed on another occasion, "that you and I might go down for a week-end?"

"Did she? Well, I suppose we might, some time."

"I'd like to."

"Would you? All right, we'll see."

"Does she ever come up to London?"

"Oh, now and then. She has some idea that one buys better tinned soups at Harrods, so she potters up about once a year."

"Does she? She might come and stay with us."

"She might; I doubt if she would."

"Why not? I mean, where does she usually stay?"

"It depends. One of these old-tabby hotels in Kensington. Or sometimes the Dorchester, if she wants to make an impression on anyone."

"Oh. What does she do all the time when she's at home?"

"What extraordinary questions you do ask. I really don't know."

"I don't think it's extraordinary. I wasn't being inquisitive, but I just wondered what kind of person she was

"She gardens; goes to the shops; reads books from Smith's library . . . Oh, yes, and she does wool tapestry-work."

"How nice. Like Queen Mary's carpet?"

"Well, she does chair-seats. She'll probably make you a set for a wedding-present."

"Do you think she would? Oh, how lovely . . ."

But throughout this, no clear picture of Mrs Powell-Duncan had emerged. It was odd. Aubrey's brother Kenneth, on the other hand, emerged more readily; probably because Aubrey's childhood anecdotes often

referred to him. These anecdotes were rare enough, but the references to: "Kenneth and I once had a pony called . . ." and: "I once made Kenneth eat half a dozen of those . . ." and: "My bro once pushed me off my bicycle into a ditch of nettles . . ."—such references produced a composite but significant Kenneth. Nicola, in her fanciful moments, wondered if he might do for Annabel; he sounded placid, accommodating, amusing. It was a pity he was shackled to a job in Glasgow.

Aubrey's father, who had died ten years ago, emerged quite clearly too—perhaps because he seemed such a 'type'; he must have spent his time always with a weapon in hand—a suitable weapon for a colonel, whatever that was, and later, a suitable weapon for shooting partridges, walloping a horse over a hedge, or walloping small boys. This latter pastime had apparently been quite habitual with him; yet Aubrey had been very fond of him, had evidently spent much of his childhood walloping his own pony over hedges in emulation; Nicola was privately grateful that this practice had been suspended, because she did not want the emulation to extend as far as Aubrey's also breaking his neck in a point-to-point.

She was sorry not to have the chance of knowing Colonel Powell-Duncan, but thought that he might have been rather alarming. In spite of the vagueness of her picture of Mrs Powell-Duncan, she was fully prepared to find her alarming too. Before the excursion on Sunday, she spent various odd moments in deliberately concocting an alarming future mother-in-law and confronting her. One of these was a burly horse-faced female surrounded by snarling dogs, another a wilting county type who kept asking whether Nicola knew the So-and-so's of Such-and-such; another was a porcelain old lady at an embroidery frame, who winced when anyone trod firmly on the floor (in this picture, Nicola tripped over the carpet whenever she moved, and said 'bloody' every time she opened her

mouth) and another was a brisk intellectual who stared through horn-rimmed glasses with an 'I-see-you-are-a-mere-social-butterfly' expression.

After all of which Nicola felt on Sunday rather as if she were about to step between the covers of a novel; the day had, from the outset, a dream-like quality. They had started early, and the sky was overcast, so that full daylight never quite came. Yet it was fine; in fact, the sky was bright to Nicola's eyes as she stared upwards from the window of the car. It was brightness without life—a prolonged dawn.

"What a funny light," she said, looking down across an open valley at folds of hillside full of silky blue shadow. "I wish the sun would come out."

"It may yet. The car's running well; shall I see what she'll do?"

"Don't bother, please. She's doing very nicely as she is."

"There are some chocolates in the front pocket for you."

"Not just now, thank you—too early in the morning." She almost added: Besides, I've just done my teeth. But then she wondered why this seemed important; she wasn't going to the dentist. Or anyway . . .

"How long will it take us?"

"Three hours should see us door-to-door."

"Darling, you'll be tired after so much driving."

"Nay, nay. I've done longer stretches. . . . By the way, I booked a table at the Silver Swan tonight."

"Oh, lovely. . . . Will we be back in time?"

"I hope so."

"Will these clothes do? You wouldn't tell me what to wear."

"Why should I? What've you got on underneath?"

"Underwear, you mean? My pink——"

"Immodest poppet; I meant, what dress under all that wuzzy coat?"

"Oh . . . My blue. And pearls."

"Thou rarest pearl of ocean . . ."

"Thank you very much. J'. . Darling, watch the road."

"Why? Doesn't compete."

"Well, will my blue dress do?"

"Do for what? We aren't going to see Monsieur Dior."

"I wish we—I mean, when we're rich, will you one time buy me a really Dior kind of a dress?"

"I'll see. Nothing over a thousand guineas, though."

"This isn't the house where you were born, is it?" she said, after a while.

"No. That was ten miles away."

"So you've never actually lived here?"

"No. Mama moved here a couple of years after Father died; I was at Oxford by then."

"But where did you live in the holidays?"

"Vacations, please. You are speaking of the Alma Mater I love."

She was pleased when he said this, and then realised that he was referring to Oxford, and wondered why she felt disappointed. "Well, where did you?"

"Round and about. Used to go off and stay with people."

"Oh. Did Kenneth live at home?"

"Oh, yes, rather. He . . . didn't get finally clear till last year, when he fled north of the Border."

She pondered this. "Do you like the Midlands?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, of course. Paternal acres, and all that."

"Belloc says they're 'sodden and unkind'."

"So was Belloc, I daresay."

"Do you really mean acres? Where you were born?"

"Acres? . . . I suppose we had. . . Oh, I don't remember. Two farms and some shooting."

She wondered what shooting looked like in terms of acreage, but did not ask. The Midlands enveloped them;

farming and industry mingled, warm red ploughing stretching away to colliery wheels on skylines. It was just after twelve when they drove through the streets of the little town and turned to climb a steep road lined with miniature suburbia. Villas dwindled to bungalows, bungalows gave way to banks and overhanging green-armed oaks. The sun almost came out, and the road was webbed with faint shadows of branches. "Are we nearly there?"

"Arrh. Wrekin heaves his fleece . . ." Aubrey pointed to a ridge beyond the naked trees.

"Isn't it lovely country."

"Arrh." The road climbed round another bend, and they drove between gateposts, up a drive bordered with rockery and the rusty tatters of herbaceous border.

"Oh, darling—are we there? Wait, wait—I must powder my nose."

"Unnecessary." He stopped the car; three silences—of the country, of Sunday, of winter—closed round them. Nicola sat up to look at the house, but Aubrey leant over to kiss her. "Cheer up; are you hungry?"

"No—yes—let go, you'll smother me——"

He laughed. "Now let's see whether the blue dress will do—

"You can't undress me here——"

"You'd be surprised."

There were footsteps on gravel, and Mrs Powell-Duncan was beside the car. Nicola extricated herself from Aubrey's arms in some confusion and scrambled out on to the driveway, shaking back her hair, clutching at her handbag. Oh dear——

Naturally enough, she could not see Aubrey's mother very clearly for the first moment; it took a few seconds for the series of anticipatory pictures to evaporate. The ghostly dowagers, ex-headmistresses, and queens-of-the-hunting-field fled dispersed, and left Nicola face to face

with a small, neat figure in tweed skirt and cashmere jersey.

"So this is Nicola . . .",

They kissed; there was a fragrance of powder, the touch of a soft cheek. Nicola thought: She's older than I really expected; and then: No, it's only her hair.

"I was just down with the hens, and I heard the car arriving. . . . Those pullets are coming on nicely, Aubrey."

"Good."

"It's not so cold today, is it? Really, it very nearly smells like spring. Well, come along indoors—lunch is almost ready."

Nicola looked round as they strolled towards the steps. The house was, she thought, fairly modern, but built of pleasantly tawny brick in graceful Queen Anne style. It stood at an angle to the wooded hill, and stared down with twinkling windows at its own gardens and orchards and the rolling fields of the plain. It had a compact gracefulness rather like that of Mrs Powell-Duncan, who was pausing on the top step to point out some plant in a wooden tub. The curious pearly light, in its clarity and unreality, muted and blended all the colourings: of the soft brickwork, Mrs Powell-Duncan's lavender-grey tweed, her hair that had the cool suggestion of blue rinse, and her deep speedwell eyes. Nicola thought: Aubrey isn't a bit like her. . . . She's awfully attractive.

"I'm afraid I don't know very much about flowers," she said shyly when appealed to.

"Nor do I; it's all very hit-and-miss, you know. Webber—my gardener—promised me that that would die if I left it out of doors for the winter. But I mustn't boast too soon; there's plenty of frost to come. This way—won't you come upstairs and take off your coat?"

The house smelt of Sunday dinner; this was surprisingly comforting, although Nicola was not hungry. Upstairs, there was a smell of lavender polish and the pervasive

warmth that comes from the baked towels and unjellified soap of that most civilised thing, a well-heated bathroom. Nicola, combing her hair at Mrs Powell-Duncan's dressing-table, looked out between the chintz curtains into the twigs of a cherry-tree.

"What a nice house," she offered.

"Do you think so? I'm so glad you like it. I wish you could come in the summer when the garden is at its best—I sound like Ruth Draper, don't I? But of course you will, won't you?"

"I should love to."

"What else would you like, my dear? Powder or . . . I've put a guest towel on the rail in the bathroom for you. . . . Yes, I was lucky to find this house, I think. It's rather large for me when I'm alone, of course. But I often have people to stay with me."

"How many rooms are there?" Nicola ventured.

Mrs Powell-Duncan seemed pleased. "Well, it's a little deceptive; there are five bedrooms, and an attic."

"You wouldn't think so, somehow."

"No—it surprised me when I first saw over the place. It must be because this upper hallway is so narrow—well, come along, let's go down and have a glass of sherry, and I'll show you the house afterwards if you like."

"Thank you very much."

On the way downstairs Mrs Powell-Duncan added: "I was rather too old-lady when I organised the removal, though; I insisted on bringing all sorts of great monuments of furniture that don't really go here at all—like that chest, for instance."

"It's lovely; is it very old?"

"Yes, a real old talley-chest—look, you can see the grooves—a lovely piece of wood. But that doesn't console people who bark their shins on it at the turn of the staircase."

In a long, low drawing-room Aubrey was listening to

'The Critics' on a radiogram set. The hearth was banked with pinkish wood embers, the furniture was loose-covered in delicately coloured chintz and evidently built to be sprawled in. On a rug by the fire lounged a golden retriever bitch with peat-brown eyes. Nicola felt at once the irrational reassurance that one does feel on meeting a dog in a strange house; as if here was at least one familiar type, like a fellow-countryman abroad.

"She doesn't bite," said Aubrey, following Nicola's eyes. "Know each other; embrace each other. . . ."

"What's her name?"

"Honey," said Mrs Powell-Duncan from the sherry tray. The dog flipped her tail in recognition of the word, and then rolled on her back, paws flopping and ears fallen inside out. Nicola knelt to stroke her, and remained sitting on the rug, her sherry on a stool beside her. Aubrey switched off the radio and came to sit opposite his mother by the hearth. It was quiet and restful, the conversation smooth and desultory; Nicola relaxed.

". . . Her mother was an excellent retriever; we had her destroyed when Father died," Aubrey was saying. Nicola glanced cautiously at Mrs Powell-Duncan, whose blue eyes were serene.

She said only: "But this one has never been gun-trained. I expect she has it in her, though; she certainly does her best to retrieve the hens if they get out. Do you remember Tinker, Aubrey?"

"Do I, indeed!" He explained to Nicola: "That was a beastly little terrier that Kenneth once had; it got into the hen-run at Garmston and slew the lot."

"Oh, he was rather a sweet little creature, though. Kennie was heartbroken when he was run over."

"More sherry, Nico?"

She shook her head. Her first glass, and the fire, and this placid atmosphere were already combining to soporific effect.

A portly maid announced luncheon, and they went into a dining-room furnished, quite evidently, with more of Mrs Powell-Duncan's salvagings from Garmston. As they ate, Nicola began to substantiate her own impressions, and she noticed that all the house had this same quality—a kind of solidity? No, one might call it a permanence. . . . Anyway, this was a house that had been lived in for a long time by a large and established family; which was funny, because it hadn't. It was just the atmosphere. . . . Studying Mrs Powell-Duncan, Nicola wondered how such a slight figure could live alone like this, and yet keep up such a tranquil family-ism in her surroundings. Then suddenly she wondered: Why didn't Aubrey want to come?

She had not, until this moment, admitted to herself so baldly that Aubrey had not wanted to come. Now, seeing him so happily planted here, she perhaps felt it safe to wonder. Yet even as she wondered, she began to feel that he was not as happy as he appeared. Or again, did he really appear happy? He was talking to his mother, listening to her stories about a calamitously ambitious nativity play produced in the parish church; he was interested, he was eating steadily. . . . Nicola's perplexity was like today's sunlight, hidden but pervasive, making the day more dream-like by its semi-presence.

" . . . and as well, they had about twelve angels packed in the organ loft, and they were supposed to burst into heavenly song on the cue—but of course Joan Humphreys got herself all muddled up with the bellows . . ." It was very amusing, this account of the play; the roast beef was admirably cooked, the heavy Wedgwood plates and silver forks were a pleasure to handle. . . . Nicola found herself enumerating like this the beauties of her surroundings. Yes, it was lovely here. Then why? . . .

She felt ashamed of herself. It was as if she were trying to pick holes in this place, even in her hostess. Some nasty little ghost of a dissatisfaction, she decided, was trying to

embody itself; quite unnecessarily. Nicola laid the ghost firmly by settling down to enjoy her day.

In the mother-of-pearl afternoon they walked about the garden, inspected the hens, climbed a stile for a view of the Wrekin; Honey started a rabbit in the orchard, to the astonishment of both, and they scampered under the trees, Honey so pleased with this excitement that she grinned pinkly. She lost her quarry in the hedge and came back to seek praise.

"I wish we had a dog," said Nicola wistfully.

"It's a pleasure to me, you know," said Mrs Powell-Duncan confidentially, "to have one that I can spoil and pet without being told off for it. Aubrey's father was always so tough with the n—of course, he trained them terribly well. He really had a way with dogs; we always used to win prizes with our hound puppies." She paused, staring pensively for a moment at Aubrey, who was a little distance away, encouraging Honey to resume her sport. Nicola asked hesitantly:

"Is Aubrey like his father?"

"Oh, very!" Mrs Powell-Duncan turned to her quickly. "How funny, that's just what I was thinking. Why did you ask that?"

"I suppose . . . well, just because he doesn't look like you."

"Oh, I see—elimination! Yes, Kennie takes much more after me. Though, funnily enough, Aubrey seems to have inherited more of my tastes; but I suppose that's difficult to judge."

"Are they very unlike?"

"Aubrey and Kennie? Yes, people usually say so. I remember when they were children— -"

"Now, Mama, don't start on that tack!" protested Aubrey, overhearing this. "Remember that this woman is still under the impression that I'll make a worthy husband; don't come across with my guilty secrets yet."

His mother laughed and slipped her hand through his arm. "I don't think I was going to divulge anything too frightful."

"I like hearing about Aubrey," put in Nicola.

"Oh, doesn't one?—I remember going to Garmston when I was engaged to Father, and I met his old nurse. She sat me down and told me exactly what a wicked little boy he had been; I teased him about that for months. . . . Let's go back, shall we? I feel like a cup of tea."

Aubrey drew Nicola to him with his free arm. "What's the matter with the old horse-chestnut?" he asked his mother suddenly, glancing across the lawn.

"Oh—lightning! Didn't I tell you? In that storm, a few weeks ago—just before Christmas. Isn't it wicked! All that side of it just *ripped* away."

"Yes, you did tell me, I think. Poor old herb."

"It looked so lovely at candle time. . . . Webber thinks it will survive, though. You must come and see it when it's in bloom."

"We shall be nearly married by then," said Nicola, surprised by the idea.

"Oh—the hens! I almost forgot them. You two go on in, I shan't be a moment——"

"Couldn't I help?" offered Nicola.

"How kind of you, dear; it's only a case of chasing them in for the night. They always remind me of old ladies round a boarding-house fire—but they're maddening sometimes when they don't feel like going in."

They felt like going in, this evening. Nicola, as she and Mrs Powell-Duncan strolled back to the house, remembered the wool tapestry and inquired after it. Mrs Powell-Duncan showed her the firescreen she was working on at the moment, unrolling it along the dining-room table. "I haven't done much lately; I must get on with it. I embroidered these chair seats too—the design was made for

me by a little woman who keeps a shop in Shrewsbury. I think it's very attractive."

"Yes—I noticed these at lunch-time; aren't they pretty?" Nicola exclaimed this with enthusiasm, then remembered what Aubrey had said about a wedding-present, and wondered nervously whether that had sounded like a hint.

But Mrs Powell-Duncan, bending over a tangled mass of wools, said spontaneously: "I was thinking that I might make something for you and Aubrey; I wonder what would be best? There was a very charming Jacobean design for chair seats in *Stitchcraft* not long ago; I kept it, because I thought it would be nice to do. . . . No, dear, I'm afraid these are hopelessly tangled; don't bother with it. I shall have to throw it out—I can't think how I get the wools so muddled——"

"I like things that are tangled," protested Nicola obstinately. She carried the multicoloured bird's-nest with her into the drawing-room, and fiddled with it in the intervals of drinking her tea. It was nearly dusk; the fire was burning up brightly, and Honey, with flattering attentiveness, lying heavily on her feet. Mrs Powell-Duncan talked about Aubrey's first letters home from his preparatory school; she said that she wanted to have this room re-decorated, and Nicola discussed with her the possibility of gilded panels for the walls. Blue, yellow, and green wools, sliding reluctantly from their bundle, hung draped across the arm of her chair. Honey grunted, dreaming, and rolled over to lay a soft jowl against her ankle. The pendulum of the little clock lilted to and fro. Nicola thought how nice it would be if they were staying here for the night; she looked at Aubrey; there was something unusual about him. She stared for some time before she realised that he was not smoking. Had he smoked, all day? She could not remember.

He met her eye unexpectedly, and returned her stare.

for a moment with a strange blankness. "It's just about time we were pushing off, you know," he said.

"Oh——"

"Oh, must you? I wish you could stay for supper."

"I'm afraid we shall be late as it is."

Late for what, Nicola asked him silently; the Silver Swan? But he was on his feet.

"Oh, Aubrey darling, and you haven't been down for so long—I did hope you would be able to stay for a day or two, some time."

"Some time," he agreed non-committally.

"There are so many things I'd like to show you—and you might get a bit of shooting with the Scotts, you know."

"Yes; that would be nice." But somehow, they were going. Nicola had to leave her wools half-unravelled, and disturb Honey in her stupor.

"I wish . . . I wish you could have stayed longer," said Mrs Powell-Duncan, on the doorstep under the lamp, standing small and desolate with the unravelled wools in her hand.

Nicola, looking back to wave as the car drew away, said: "Isn't she awfully lonely?"

Aubrey sounded the horn and plunged out of the gateway into the winding road. "Light me a fag, will you?"

She put it between his lips, he inhaled deeply and blew smoke from his nostrils so that it splayed against the windscreen.

"Are you going to be warm enough? There's a rug in the back."

"Yes, I'm warm."

In the town lamps and twilight shone gold and blue on the Sunday-evening loafers and chapel-goers. Aubrey said: "We'll be in town before nine." He did not speak again for ten minutes.

Nicola, closing her eyes, leaned back to reflect on the day. It had been a dream; she could not remember it

chronologically; and few visual impressions remained—only stray details like the peevish face of a hen, the border of a Wedgwood plate, Honey's downy ears. She said sleepily:

"Thank you for bringing me; I did have a good time."

"Good."

"Why didn't you smoke?" she asked more alertly.

"I don't often, at Elm Ridge."

"Why not? Doesn't your mother like it?"

"She doesn't mind; I suppose it just doesn't occur to me."

"Aubrey . . . Isn't she nice!"

"Mama? Very."

"I think she's charming. . . . I loved the story about the angels in the organ loft. . . . Aubrey?"

"M'm?"

"Why are you so quiet?"

"Just recovering."

Nicola woke up fully, sat up and looked at him.

"Aubrey . . . are you cross?"

"Yes. Afraid so."

"With me?"

"No. Don't be a goose."

"Then? . . ." She waited but he was giving all his attention to the road. The sky was closed into evening now, and oncoming traffic poured splashes of headlight along the verges. Nicola could not see Aubrey clearly; she thought he was about to speak, and waited on. When he was still silent, she lay back in her seat again, feeling puzzled and disappointed.

What had been wrong with this day? Looking back on it, she could not remember. It had not been a complete day either; it had been a series of details, none of which now seemed significant; as if, all the time, she had been preoccupied, but had now forgotten with what.

Yet, considering it sternly, she saw that it had all been

very pleasant. The only doubtful factor had been her curious tendency to examine everything over-critically; this, she now saw, had been the fault of an initial anxiety; but what had caused the anxiety she had no idea. Nothing could have been calmer, more pleasant than Elm Ridge and its mistress. Then? . . .

She glanced sidelong at Aubrey. What had he really thought of the day—why on earth should he be angry, and with what or whom? He had seemed happy enough. . . . Or, looking back again, had he? She could not accurately remember his attitude, his expression, his words. She might have been spending the day with two strangers.

Nicola did not like this idea. Nor did she like being with a stranger now. She had never before hesitated before speaking to Aubrey—she had never been uncertain of his response.

“Darling . . .” she began tentatively.

“H’m?”

She said weakly: “Would you like another fag?”

“Thanks.”

She lit it for him slowly, delaying it, as if this would give her an excuse to speak to him. But when she had put the cigarette between his lips, neither of them said any more. The road was clear, and the night fine. Aubrey observed after several minutes:

“We’re making good time.”

“Are we in a hurry?”

“No; we need not be; are you hungry? We could eat on the way, instead of waiting.”

“Yes,” she said impulsively. “Let’s do that.”

Without further comment, he turned the car in at the drive of a hotel that they were approaching. The hotel did not look in any way remarkable; Nicola wondered whether it would be up to Aubrey’s standards. He had seemed to accept the nearest chance of food, without

evident discrimination. Either he was careless of their surroundings or he thought she was so hungry that anything would be better than going farther. She wondered why she did not ask which it was. But she accompanied him silently into a cheerless dining-room dripping with funeral-parlour ferns.

Over plates of tepid and glutinous soup they talked about the best method of house-training cats; something in the atmosphere made this topic relevant. Nicola thought: Why are Sunday evenings so dreary?

The meal dragged on. Aubrey cut his cold beef into strips, helped himself to pickle, and remarked with more animation: "Look; a picture by Crome." He indicated his plate.

"Ugh," said Nicola, who happened to know his views on eighteenth-century British painting. They laughed. The drooping waiter looked at them in mild astonishment.

"Oh, what a place. . . . Can you bear it?" Aubrey added.

"Yes, of course."

"I thought you were hungry."

"I was—am—was, I mean."

"Let's rush on to town and have something else in a Lyons'."

"No, really, I'm full. . . . Are you?"

"Eaten too much all day."

"So did I, really. It was a wonderful lunch."

"M'm." They looked at each other; Nicola said:

"Didn't you have a good time?"

He said evasively: "The place is more attractive in the spring, I think."

"Aubrey . . ."

"What's on your mind?"

"Well, you are."

"Why?"

"I don't know. . . . I didn't think you . . ." She could

not bring herself to point out that he had not wanted to go and see his mother. Aubrey himself looked rather as if he could hardly admit that he had not wanted to go and see his mother. But Nicola hated this tension; they had never been ill at ease with each other before, and she reminded herself that, after all, this was still Aubrey. She said gaily: "I suppose other people's families are always difficult. D'you remember first meeting *my* mother?"

"Rather. I came to call for you on the night of the Hatchett's do, and she was stitching you into your dress—you were standing on the drawing-room table."

"Was I," she asked boldly, "as nice to your mother as you were to mine?"

"Damn it all," said Aubrey. The waiter, just crawling alongside to collect the plates, received that observation in his ear and recoiled feebly. "I'm sorry," went on Aubrey.

"Were you talking to him?" asked Nicola doubtfully, as the waiter shambled off.

"No. To you. I'm sorry you had such a dreary day."

"Such a *what*? But I loved it. I said so."

"I know you said so."

"Did you think I was just being polite?"

"Not 'just'. But my poppet. . . . You can't have enjoyed spending all day shutting up hens and disentangling wool and admiring furniture."

"But I did. Of course I did."

They looked down at their plates. Baked apples, still in shades of muted khaki, had appeared in pools of custard. Aubrey said curtly:

"I'm afraid Mother takes her visitors . . . rather for granted."

"How do you mean?—Anyway, I don't mind."

"Well, I did, rather."

"Why?"

"Because I took you to see her."

"But . . . I did . . ."

"I would have been better pleased if she'd gone so far as to show any interest in you."

"Oh, darling—she did!"

"Did she? Did she ask you one question about yourself?"

"Well—why should she? I liked her, and I wanted to help her, and—and I'm younger than she is; when I go to visit people like that, I expect to be helpful."

"No doubt. But, when it was her future daughter-in-law, I would have preferred her to show rather more personal enthusiasm. That's all."

"Considering it was I who . . ." She checked herself, then went on: "Or do you mean that you were hurt because she didn't pay enough attention to your future wife?"

"Possibly."

"You're exaggerating."

"Exaggerating what? I'm sorry; I knew it would be like that. But of course I wanted you to meet her."

"Do you think she . . . thought I would do?"

Aubrey glanced up quickly; he frowned, and leaned back in his chair. "Yes, I'm sure she did," he said perfunctorily. "As far as she ever takes the trouble to assess anybody."

"That sounds rather ill-natured of you."

"I expect it is."

"I don't see why you need worry; I didn't mind that she didn't make a fuss of me. . . . I'd rather people didn't."

"That's noble of you; but it isn't just a case of . . ." He pushed away his plate.

"I wish we hadn't come in here."

"I'm sorry."

"No—I mean, we didn't know until we were in."

"Let's go, shall we?" He turned to summon the waiter.

Nicola prodded at the tarpaulin apple-skin on her plate. She was trying not to remember again the events of today in the light of what Aubrey had said. Because, he was right: Mrs Powell-Duncan had not, now she thought of it, seemed at all interested in her—or in Aubrey either, except as he had been before the age of ten. But that did not matter. Of course not. Unreasonably, she began to feel cross with Aubrey for mentioning it.

She remembered that, had she not taxed him, he might not have done so. This made her cross with herself too, and cast a gloom over the day. She felt that all her party manners had been wasted, or rather, as if she had assumed party manners and had wasted them; it had all seemed, at the time, to be quite natural and friendly; but now . . . It had all been artificial, unnecessary; a waste of a day.

Except for Honey. Thinking of Honey, she realised that she had made one new acquaintance today; and, by contrast, Mrs Powell-Duncan . . . well, of course, they would get to know each other later. They would meet again, heaven knew; they had the rest of their lives. There was no need to be as huffy as Aubrey seemed, just because of one day's wasted intercourse.

Aubrey was being rather silly about it, she decided. If it had not been for him, she would never have thought of the day as wasted. He himself had been remarkably inert, all the time. If Nicola and Mrs Powell-Duncan had been alone—if Nicola came down again, on her own——

She looked across at Aubrey nervously as if he might have read this thought. What could be the matter with her—how could she *want* to go anywhere without him?

Nicola smiled at him; his face, which had been stern, relaxed a little. "Come on," he said. "Shall we get going?"

"Yes, let's." Some time, she reflected, we must have all this out. But not tonight; I'll think it over, and wait till Aubrey's in a better mood.

It was the first time she had ever deferred to his moods where she herself was concerned.

Aubrey had to return the car to John in Hammersmith that evening, so he dropped Nicola at home, but did not come into the house. She went up to the drawing-room and found the family idling round its good-night cup of tea.

"Hello, darling—did you have a good time?"

"Oh, yes, thank you."

"Get yourself a cup. . . . Tell us what Mrs Powell-Duncan is like?"

"Oh, she's awfully nice . . ." But Nicola still found that Mrs Powell-Duncan had been a surprisingly insignificant feature of the day. She made an effort. "She's small—quite young really, but with white hair. . . . She's got a lovely house. . . . Oh, and such a nice dog . . ."

It almost seemed as if she were making the whole thing up. Mummy was satisfied; Daddy politely interested; but Nicola thought Annabel glanced across at her with one of her maddening, measuring looks. She returned the look with a cold glare, and went down to the kitchen to collect her cup.

3

February

THE twigs outside the window looked like bog cotton; their dollops of snow did not fly off, even when the wind rattled them together. On the ground, patches of similarly weather-toughened snow lay against the walls and mingled, grey-speckled, with the stones of the rockery. But there was a snowdrop out under the farther pear-tree.

"... and the daffodils are coming up a treat," reported Kitty cheerfully, as she clapped a syrup tart on to the table.

"Can spring be far behind?" mumbled Noel, glancing at the tart and then stretching a hand behind him for the cheese. Philippa, sitting beside him, jumped up obediently and brought the cheese-dish from the carving-table.

"Nico? Tart?" asked Margaret briskly.

"No. . . . Oh, all right please; a little."

"Annabel?"

"Just a little, please."

"What's the matter with you women? You like syrup. You need stoking up, too, in this weather."

"Well, I've got a hole in my back tooth, I think," explained Annabel. "Anyway, sweet things get stuck there and give me hell." Noel frowned at her. "Sorry, they give me pain," she amended rather ungraciously.

Nicola said nothing. She propped her chin on one hand and poked at her plate without enthusiasm. Margaret looked at her for a moment and turned back to Annabel.

"Mr Baker for you, then. Don't forget."

"Okay."

"Philippa, what are you doing?" Don't you want some tart?"

Philippa jumped. "I was just having a little bit of cheese. . . ."

"Well, why not have some tart as well?"

"No, thank you."

Margaret sighed. "Have you got toothache too?"

"No."

"She's given up sweet things for Lent," explained Annabel briskly. "Didn't you notice? She wouldn't have pudding last night either."

Philippa gave her a venomous look, but did not answer this. Margaret sighed again and asked:

"All sweet things, darling? I thought it was only sweets—you know, in the paper-bag sense?"

"That was last year," said Annabel. "She's progressing."

"Be quiet, Annabel."

"I can do what I like," announced Philippa, with more passion than conviction.

"I should have hoped that giving up puddings was what you didn't like," pointed out Annabel.

"Don't tease her. Philippa, though, you need sugar in the cold weather. Really. It gives you body-fuel."

"Calories," interpreted Annabel.

"I don't care."

"Well, I do," retorted Margaret. "I don't want to see you fading away before my eyes."

"You're encouraging her; that's just what she wants to do."

"Much good that will do her," put in Nicola gloomily.

"I wish you two would leave her alone," said Margaret exasperated.

"I wish *you* would," said Philippa clearly.

There was silence. Everyone looked at Noel: a sure

symptom that things had gone too far. Recognising the symptom, Noel roused himself, recapitulated the recent conversation inwardly (a gift of his that had been useful in a lifetime of dull meetings) and, having considered it, said: "Philippa. That'll do. You had better go upstairs if you can't be polite to your mother."

Philippa burst into tears and went, closing the door gently.

"Oh, Noel," began Margaret at once, "need you—?"

"Yes, I need. That child's getting above herself."

He gobbled his last biscuit, folded his napkin and retreated before the topic could detain him. The other three sat without speaking for a while. Then Nicola said:

"I don't see the good of giving up things for Lent really."

"It might be good for the teeth," said Annabel lazily.

"Oh, Annabel, must you be so . . ." Margaret, folding her own napkin, forgot what she had been going to say. She glanced at the clock. "I wonder what Philippa's doing this afternoon?"

"Nothing. Anyway, she hasn't to go back to school for anything."

"Have you?"

"Not to school, no; but some of us are going to meet at Corinne's house to arrange about the Dramatic Society orgy."

"Will you be late back?"

"I shouldn't think so. Oh, you're going to school, though, aren't you? I'd forgotten."

"H'm. I hadn't. Remind me again—what do I say to Miss Swann?"

Annabel repeated her coaching. It was half-term Friday, and also the day of the Parents' Reception, which Margaret had committed herself to attending. She leant her elbows on the table, concentrating. "Yes. . . . Oh, yes, I remember Miss Pearce; she's easy to talk to. . . . But

who was it—the new one—Miss Bryce? What do I say to her?"

"You might say that I seem to be enjoying her lessons so much."

"Are you?"

"Lord, no. But she needs encouragement."

"I see. Who else is likely to talk about you?"

"Miss Daly might; the gym hag."

"Oh, I remember her all right. Do I have to talk to her? She terrifies me."

"No—you needn't. I think that's all, for me."

Margaret checked the items over on her fingers, nodding. "I should have asked you all this before. . . . Now who's going to attack me about Philippa? I asked her last night, and she only said Miss Turnbull . . . Miss Ewen . . . Miss Garbett . . ."

"Didn't she say Miss Barlow?"

"No; which is she?"

"Oh . . . never mind, then."

Margaret was suspicious. "Is she someone special?"

"You'd better ask Philippa."

"Oh. I see . . . I will. I wonder why she didn't mention her?"

"One never knows, with that child."

"Oh. No, one doesn't. You think Philippa has an admiration for her?"

"It looks like it; but perhaps I'm being indiscreet."

"No; just unsympathetic," Nicola threw in coldly. The others looked at her, surprised.

"Miss Barlow teaches chemistry," said Annabel temperately.

"Oh, yes. Of course. But I thought we were over that by now—anyway, Philippa hasn't been talking about science nearly so much lately."

"Bad sign," muttered Annabel.

"Oh dear. Why? Do you think she's still . . . Well. I'll

look out for Miss Barlow, then. I can't remember her; what does she look like?

"A horse. Well, a nice horse, you know; an Arab."

"Don't say that—you'll muddle me, and if I do meet the woman I shall giggle. . . . What would you like me to wear?"

"No preference, thank you. Ask Philippa."

Margaret nodded and went to the door. "Nico," she added, "what are you doing this afternoon?"

"I haven't decided," replied Nicola distantly.

"Well—don't forget you promised Auntie Honor that you'd go and see her little 'broderie-anglaise' woman some time."

"I needn't go today. Any time will do."

"Yes—but you may as well arrange about it soon, darling. There's quite a lot she could do, if she's any good."

"Oh, all right."

"And she might need the work; Auntie Honor said she has this old mother with a malignant tumour——"

"Surely," interrupted Nicola, rising and pushing in her chair, "I can order my underwear without being responsible for a Hospital for Incurables."

Margaret went out without answering; Nicola, abashed by the vulgarity of her own remark, stared out of the window and whistled between her teeth. She was not cheered by Annabel's saying:

"It's a good thing Daddy had gone, or he'd have sent you out of the room as well."

Nicola whistled louder. She broke off to say: "I suppose you are the only one worthy to remain in civilised company."

"Huh."

"Well, you're enough to drive anyone to extremes. I wish Miss Bryce could hear what you say about her."

"Bryce? Thank heaven she can't."

"Really, you are a hypocrite: I can't see that it's up to you to pat the poor creature on the back—and as for talking about encouraging her—well, heaven help us, that's all."

"Help who? Whom, I mean."

"Anybody who's not so bloody well adjusted as the gracious Annabel Goodwin."

Annabel scratched her chin and looked contemplatively at Nicola. "I wonder what's the matter with this family just now," she mused aloud.

"Well. You tell us. You know everything."

"Oh, Nico, don't be so—I mean, why are you so peevish? Is anything the matter?"

"'Tell Auntie Worldly-Wise, enclosing a stamped addressed envelope.' Little sunbeam."

It so happened that this kind of exchange drove Annabel deeper into imperturbability, and Nicola deeper into ill-chosen irony. Each knew that she was antagonising the other; but Nicola wanted a nice childish squabble, whereas Annabel was striving to calm the situation. So Nicola squeaked her finger-nails along the window-pane, and Annabel frowned thoughtfully; each waited for the other to speak again.

"And need you tell Mummy all Philippa's secrets?" resumed Nicola, after a while, with an exaggeration that was evident even to herself.

Annabel merely said: "I didn't," with maddening lack of interest.

"You're awfully young for your age," murmured Nicola, with a belated attempt at patronage. Even this did not rouse Annabel. She sighed, and began to collect the plates.

"Perhaps I am," she admitted without heat.

"I wonder where you *get* this idea that you know best about everything?" persisted Nicola, swinging round.

"As far as I know, I haven't got any such idea yet."

"Don't be daft." Nicola paused; unwillingly, she began to admit to herself that there was a purpose behind all this regrettable display. She wanted to force something from Annabel; she wanted, perhaps, to force out something that Annabel seemed to represent at the moment. She was flagrantly blaming Annabel for some hidden dissatisfaction; and she was not blaming her for causing it, but only for recognising it. It was as if Annabel knew something that Nicola herself did not want to; as if Annabel was aware of something that Nicola would prefer to ignore. And all this ill-bred jeering at Annabel's judgement was, simply, stimulated by Nicola's secret but genuine respect for that judgement. (Mummy had said once: "... you will be grateful for a sister with clear-sighted common sense . . .")

Annabel was a fly in the ointment—a spanner in the works—but she was not only a nuisance; she was an uneasy reminder of imperfection—

What am I thinking? Nicola reproved herself. What is it that Annabel might say if only I could goad her to it—what is it that I don't want to hear, but privately know? What is it that I can't bear to think about, but that *must* be brought out into the open?

She pondered this, leaning her forehead against the window, while behind her Annabel and Kitty cleared the table and talked about Cup Final prospects. (As if Annabel knew anything about football—but she always pretended to know all about everything. . . . This spurt of irritation died of itself before Nicola had formed it.) Pondering her question, she answered it simply:

Nothing. There was nothing wrong. It was just this beastly frigid weather; and that she had broken her pearl necklace; and that there was a vague, uncertain uneasiness swimming about in the back of her mind—ever since that day when she and Aubrey had gone down to Elm

Ridge. . . . Not that it had anything to do with that; it had just been a point in time wherefrom to measure.

There was nothing wrong; but Nicola hadn't the courage to take out, and examine, and identify, this 'nothing'. So she had tried to make Annabel state it, in order to contradict her. But Annabel wouldn't. She was so infernally smug. She sat in the middle of the family like the harpies—or was it the furies—who held the threads of fate; eternally detached; eternally knowing; eternally the Sensible One.

Damn her, thought Nicola. The dining-room door had closed and she was alone with the bare polished table and the ghosts of lunch-smells. She pressed her face to the window, and tears slipped mistily between her cheeks and the glass.

All about *nothing*, she told herself resolutely. Oh, I wish Aubrey would . . . would explain to me what's the matter. Even though it's nothing at all.

Margaret, standing for a moment in the hall, heard the piano strumming aimlessly in the drawing-room. She went upstairs and into the room, and stood behind Philippa without speaking.

Philippa spun round on the stool and flung her arm round Margaret's waist. "Oh, I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean anything . . ."

Margaret patted her shoulder and asked cheerfully "What would you like me to wear this afternoon?"

"Oh, goodness, it's the Parents' Reception, and I've forgotten. . . . Could you possibly wear your red suit? Only it doesn't matter a bit. I just like you in that."

"Right. Red suit . . . Hat? Which?"

"The red one?"

"Right. Thank you."

"Mummy . . . I didn't mean to be rude."

"People rarely do," replied Margaret placidly.

"Was Daddy very cross with me?"

"N—— Well, I expect he just wondered what had become of your manners for a moment."

"It *was* a moment."

"Yes; only a moment." She sat down on the arm of a chair. "Is there anybody special you want me to talk to?"

"This afternoon at the Reception? I don't . . . think so . . ." Philippa looked down at the keyboard; her hair slid forward across her face.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?"

"I hadn't thought. I might practise."

There's something amiss in this family, thought Margaret dismally. All these children are out of sorts in various ways; is it the weather? She looked round the drawing-room; it seemed uninhabited; too tidy; cold.

Noel called up the stairs: "I'll be late-ish."

"Right. But remember Tom," called back Margaret elliptically. The front door banged. Of course, this was an odd kind of day, because everyone was home for lunch on a Friday. She rocked slightly on her chair-arm, nursing her elbows. "Listen, darling, if you insist on not eating puddings, you must eat something else to make up. Will you?"

Philippa said nothing. She ran her thumbnail up and down a black note.

"Of the two," remarked Margaret, "I think I'd rather be told to leave someone alone than be just ignored."

"I wasn't ignoring. . . . I was thinking," said Philippa, after a pause.

"Oh."

The conversation seemed to have flagged. Margaret tried again. "Well, find something nice to do this afternoon, and run off and do it. It's half term, after all."

"I know. I wish it wasn't."

"Good heavens—why? Are you sorry to miss an afternoon's school?"

"Yes," said Philippa simply. She stood up and closed the piano. Margaret looked at her blankly.

"What lesson is it that you miss?" she asked.

"Chemistry."

"Oh . . . I see."

"*What* d'you see?" demanded Philippa crossly.

"Nothing," returned Margaret nonsensically. She stood up too, and tweaked back Philippa's hair. Philippa stood unresponsive, her arms folded, her face expressionless.

"Miss Barlow teaches chemistry, doesn't she?" Margaret pursued casually. "Will she be there this afternoon?"

"I suppose so. Why?"

"I just wondered. I'd like to see her."

Philippa looked up quickly; she almost smiled. Margaret thought: Well, thank heaven, she isn't entirely inanimate. I was beginning to wonder.

She didn't in the least like to find Philippa in this frame of mind; nothing could have been less characteristic as a rule. It might have been the missing of chemistry; or the missing of Miss Barlow; or the Lenten fast. . . . Reminded, Margaret urged:

"Now listen, darling, you will eat something at tea-time, won't you? Get Kitty to open some fish paste or something, if you don't want anything sweet."

Philippa raised her eyebrows, nodded slightly, and turned away. Margaret went slowly to her room to change for this tiresome Reception. Now, I suppose, she reflected, I've offended her sense of religious decorum as well. . . . But, all the same, I won't have her starving herself. I wonder if Miss Barlow is a Catholic or a rigid faster, or something? Might find out. If I see the woman.

She took out the red corduroy suit that Philippa had recommended, and reached on top of the wardrobe for the hatbox that contained the red matching hat. Blouse? She hesitated, and almost went to find Philippa again to seek advice; then reproved herself. Did all the other

mothers go to these lengths to accoutre themselves as ambassadresses? Because she couldn't help feeling it unlikely that the mistresses would be much impressed—or even duly observant.

In the school gymnasium she wondered that anyone, mistress or parent, should have leisure to notice what anyone else was wearing—let alone space to see. Folding tables had been placed in lines along the floor, cluttering what moving-room there was, and between them and the scattered chairs a seething crowd was elbowing about. Voices shrilled and bellowed; a few bold spirits had lit cigarettes, to add to the general discomfort. Someone thrust a plateful of buns at Margaret, and, when she refused the offer, turned round twice on the spot and thrust the same plate at her again.

"No, thank you," repeated Margaret, in higher key. She backed cautiously away and lodged herself against the ribstalls. So far, she had spoken to no one except the head-mistress, who had received her. She thought hopefully of extricating herself without speaking to anyone else, but then stiffened her resolution. "What we do for our children . . ." she murmured, weaving her way sideways up the room.

"Good afternoon," hooted someone in her ear. "I remember you! Mrs Goodwin, isn't it?"

"Yes," she admitted. But this wasn't even a mistress; it was hatted and coated and evidently someone's mother—whose though, she had quite forgotten.

"Sally's not in Annabel's form any more, of course, but I remember you quite well," proceeded the hatted one. At that, memory stirred: two years ago, a child called Sally had come to one of Annabel's parties, and had been sick on the stair carpet in the middle of a game of 'murder'. Margaret smiled palely at the recollection and at the bilious one's mother.

"How is Sally?" she asked.

"Well, she's doing quite well; but of course I always say it was a bad mistake, you know, leaving her down like that. She needs confidence; that's all it is. With just a bit more trouble, they could so easily have helped her on. That was all she needed. It was such a pity. Because Annabel and the others are up in the Sixth now, and everything——"

Some deliverer barged between them with cups of tea, and another voice said: "Mrs Goodwin! How are you?"

"Oh, Miss Pearce . . ." Margaret fell on her gratefully. But this respite was brief; Miss Pearce only wanted to tell her that Annabel was making a good prefect, and that she was so glad to hear about Nicola's engagement, and that Margaret's hat was a most exhilarating colour; then she produced from behind her, like a rabbit from a hat, a small wisp of affability which she introduced as Miss Bryce. "I hope I'll see you again, but I must tackle that formidable Mrs Holloway . . ." and Miss Pearce was gone.

Miss Bryce was heavy going. Miss Swann was easier, because she wanted to talk about Philippa's increasing rate of progress, and was content to let Margaret nod approval. There was a grisly time with a Miss Mills, of whom Margaret had never heard, but who seemed to hold decided views on the value of discipline. It turned out that she taught needlework, which neither Annabel nor Philippa learnt. Escaping again, Margaret joined up with a nervous-looking father who had wedged himself behind the vaulting horse, and exchanged ideas about how to grow artichokes. Margaret had never tried to do this, but she remembered that her grandfather had, and managed to show a sustaining interest.

Someone, at last, opened a window. The bun-plates were emptily crumby; the crowd was thinning. Parents could move more freely, and get at the slips of paper written out for their guidance by their young. Voices

were heard saying; "Oh, I *would* just like to see Miss Turnbull before I go . . ."

This, Margaret told herself, won't do. She issued from her haven and her artichokes, and found Miss Garbett; really they had little to say to each other. Miss Ewen was quite obviously too exhausted to talk at length, which was a pity, because she could be entertaining on the subject of schoolgirl map-drawing. Miss Pearce scuttled up again, but was at once captured by a father in clerical collar, and towed off to a window embrasure.

"Hullo . . ." This was Mrs Baker, the mother of Corinne. Margaret shook her hand gaily. "How wonderful to find someone one knows . . . Isn't this grim?"

"Oh, terrifying. And I'm meant to be at a bridge party ten minutes ago. I really must see Miss Barlow, though. How's Annabel? I thought she looked rather pale on Tuesday."

"Pale? Tuesday?" echoed Margaret, distracted by the reference to Miss Barlow. "I had to see her too. . . . I think she's all right."

"She's just over there, talking to Mrs Sadler. Yes, I expect she was just a bit tired," returned Mrs Baker, her pronouns equally muddled. "I'm glad she and Corry are still friendly; they don't see nearly so much of each other in school now, of course, with all this specialisation."

"No . . . I suppose not." Margaret was searching for Miss Barlow. When she saw her, she remembered her at once, and with some relief. Oh, yes; that one. She turned back to Mrs Baker, smiling. "How's Corinne getting on? I loved that green dress she wore when she came round last Saturday."

"Oh, that's mine; she borrowed it. Aren't they the limit, these kids? . . . I suppose none of yours are the same shape as you, though."

"Is that a compliment?" They laughed. "Listen, do

tell me about Miss Barlow; it appears Philippa is smitten with the creature to the extent of talking about taking up science."

"Is she? She might do worse; Corinne speaks highly of her teaching, anyway. I'm sorry for Annabel being dumped with that little——"

Margaret contorted her features horribly in warning as Miss Bryce walked past, behind Mrs Baker. Changing the subject, she asked: "How's your son. . . . I'm so sorry, his name escapes me——"

"Terry? Very well, thank you."

As Mrs Baker went on to refer to Nicola's wedding, Margaret remembered that there was—something—about Terry; what was it? Oh, Lord, yes, he was a cripple. That had nearly been a bad slip. . . . She said: "Look—Miss Barlow is about to be vacated. Your turn."

Mrs Baker stepped forward for her 'turn', and Margaret studied the chemistry mistress meanwhile. The room was nearly empty; the mistresses perceptibly wilting, but the parents who remained, being the most indomitable, still at full stretch. Mrs Baker and Miss Barlow had perched themselves on a pile of forms and lit cigarettes. Mrs Baker held out her cigarette-case to Margaret, adding to Miss Barlow: "Mrs Goodwin is queuing up for you, too——"

"Mrs Goodwin?" Miss Barlow looked at her with quick interest. Margaret noticed her interest and her tiredness in the same glance, and said on an impulse:

"I don't want to talk about chemistry so much as about Philippa, and I know you're worn out. Wouldn't you come round for a drink one evening and talk in peace? I'd be so grateful."

"That would be lovely; I'd like to talk about Philippa too. Thank you so much."

"Well, when? Then I'll clear off and leave you to Mrs Baker. Any time this week-end?"

"I'm afraid I'm going home for half-term—I'll be out of London. Supposing—Monday, when I come back?"

"Yes; that will be lovely. Six-thirty-ish?" *

"Thank you. I'll look forward to that."

So shall I, thought Margaret rather grimly as she made her way out of the gymnasium. I wonder if that was a wise thing to do; will Philippa mind? Because, *I* mind.

She would have found it difficult to say what she minded, or why. But the encounter with Miss Barlow had had an unexpected significance. That woman was in some way important to Philippa, and one might almost have said that Philippa might be important to her; well, she had certainly registered something. . . .

Am I jealous? Margaret asked herself on the stairs. Oh, what nonsense. Nothing of the kind. I just want to have a good look at the woman, without those frightful surroundings. That's why I asked her to the house. And besides, she looks more all-there than most of those dough-faced schoolma'ams.

Monday; I must remember. Would it be better to have Philippa present or not? Will Noel be home early that evening? Oh dear; what have I let myself in for?

It was growing dusk as she left the school building. She sighed with relief as she gained the roadway, and then thought suddenly: All those women spend hours of every day in there. I wonder how they stand it. No wonder they grow to look a bit institutionalised, poor creatures.

Terry pushed open the kitchen door on what seemed an assembly of females. Someone stopped short in the middle of a tirade about "... cutting every perishing speech the perisher has—" and the females looked round, books in hand.

"Hullo," Terry said, navigating himself into the corner by the stove.

"D'you know everybody?" asked Corinne, with a wave

of her book. "You will soon, anyway, because we're just about to invite you to tea with us."

"That's kind of you. Hullo, Elizabeth . . . Annabel . . . Pauline . . . June . . ." He paused before the fifth, inquiringly.

"Oh, this is my brother Terry—Gill Cohen—sorry, I thought you'd met."

"I'm sure we haven't," said Terry, holding out a hand. "I certainly shouldn't have forgotten . . ."

"Overwhelmed, I'm sure," murmured Gillian.

"I hoped you would be; I'm not often gallant—am I, Annabel?—Oh by the way, don't rush off, because I've got something to show you."

"All right." Annabel was a little shy of meeting Terry today, and relieved to see him evidently in a good temper.

"No one's rushing off; I've just mashed the tea. June, you might make an arm for some cups—you know where."

"I'm rushing off," said Gillian, glancing at the clock. "Sorry and all that."

"No, you can't; it's going to be a party."

"Must. Friday. Got to be pious-Jewish-home by sundown."

"Oh, yes, of course, I'd forgotten. But you just can't leave hospitable-Gentile-home without a cup of chah. You can pour it in your saucer if you like."

June clattered the cups on the table, and Corinne flew for milk and sugar. "Biscuits in the blue tin behind you, Pauline. Spoons in the table drawer, Elizabeth." The kitchen was full of bustle again. Annabel, perching on a corner of the table, looked at Terry; he was sitting still, watching Gillian. Following his eyes, Annabel studied the accidental picture that Gillian had made by framing herself in the green door-panel of the store cupboard. She was gazing down at the book in her hand; the green background darkened her hair, and emphasised her pale-olive skin, while her stillness drew attention to the lines of her

curling lashes and sweet melancholy-monkey face and the plaits of hair bound round her head. Annabel looked from her to Terry, and a thought struck her painfully, unexpectedly: What if Terry ever falls in love with somebody?

She had never thought of this before. She wished she had not thought of it now, without knowing why; except that it would be such a frightful thing to happen to him. . . . She jumped off the table, as if rousing herself. For that horrid moment she had seen Terry's life as something twisted, wrought out of shape, in spite of all that anyone could do to help. With so many other things, his loss was more active—well, for instance, he could not play cricket; so he avoided that simply by doing other things instead, by avoiding cricket pitches. But this was different. He couldn't avoid falling in love—at least, looking again from him to Gillian, Annabel saw the avoidance as much more chancy, and Terry more purely as a victim. Supposing he did; supposing—she said briskly to Corinne:

"Are you pouring a cup for Vera or your father? I'll carry them through."

"Thanks; I'll come with you, actually, to open the middle door . . ." When they were outside the kitchen, Corinne added swiftly: "I think what Terry wants to show you is a letter from Bridget."

"A letter? . . ." Annabel was still trying to shake the picture of Terry and Gillian from her mind. She stared at Corinne, bewildered. "Oh—Bridget—in South Africa?"

"M'm. I thought I'd warn you. I didn't know whether you'd rather see it or not. . . . I believe it's about Aubrey."

Annabel stopped half-way through the passage door.

"What about Aubrey? Do you mean that he asked?"

"I think he must have. He hasn't shown me the letter; but he said he was going to show it to you when you came."

"Oh. What do you think's in it?" New apprehensions had swept recent ones away. "Didn't he say?"

"No, he didn't. I can't guess. Only, I wondered if it would be better for you not to know . . . anything."

"I didn't think he was at all interested; did he write just for that? I wonder why. . . . Oh, yes, I must know, if that's what he wants to show me. It might be nothing at all."

"It might."

"Oh, but, he wouldn't tell me if it said anything . . . that I wouldn't want to know."

"Well . . . perhaps he thinks you ought to?"

"Now, at any rate, I shall have to; or I shall imagine heaven knows what," said Annabel gloomily.

"That's just the trouble. I knew it would be. I'm awfully sorry."

"About what?"

"Well, that anyone in this house had ever heard of Aubrey at all."

"It doesn't matter. Heavens, nothing I say would make any difference to Nicola, anyway." As soon as she had said this, she wondered. No, of course it wouldn't. And she wouldn't say anything. Unless of course . . . She shivered. It seemed chilly in the passage. "Come on—the tea will be cold."

Vera, Mr Baker's receptionist, was writing in her little cubby-hole under the stairs. While Corinne took her father's cup into the surgery Annabel, rather admiring her own grasp of several matters at once, made herself an appointment for next Saturday morning. So much for the tooth that didn't like syrup. She followed Corinne back to the kitchen, to find that Gillian was just going.

"And we'll post up the cast after half-term," she was saying as she pulled on her gloves. "Then those juniors will have time to learn their parts before the night, for a change. Or let's hope so. They never do."

"Someone will have to beat them up about it. Gill, you can speak to them fiercely to start with."

"That won't impress them. But I wish they would make an effort this time; Annabel, you can harangue them. That's more likely to work."

"Oh, rubbish," protested Annabel comfortably. "They pay no attention at all to my fierceness."

"Well, try your persuasive technique. That's a certainty."

"Is it?" asked June, interested. "I haven't seen Annabel persuading anybody."

"You should see her handling Miss Bryce."

"I don't 'handle' her!"

"No. Perhaps that's rather inexact." Gillian stared at Annabel for a moment, impersonally and searchingly. "But there's certainly a way you have with people. I wish I had it. Somehow they have confidence in you."

"Gill, you're making me squirm."

"Very sorry. Well, I must rush. Thanks so much, Corinne."

Corinne went with her to the door; the others, grouped about the table, were talking about the Dramatic Society again; Terry was reading a newspaper in his corner. Or, so he was as Annabel poured out her own tea by the stove; but as she put down the teapot she caught him staring intently at her, with an expression rather like Gillian's. She felt her face twisting into a sycophantic smile, but he had resumed his reading.

"Well . . ." said June, after a few minutes. "Shall we wash up for you?"

There was a general move. "Corinne, if you walk home with me now I can show you those curtains; they're so infernal heavy to lug all the way to school unless we're sure they'll do."

* "Yes, I will—only, wait a moment; I swore to Mother that I'd start the supper. So maybe I'd better, Pauline—I could come round another time? Poor Ma was a bit over-organised, with the Parents' Bunfight as well——"

"Oh, yes—poor creatures. My mother was groaning aloud at the prospect. . . . Well, all right, only I hope they won't be sent off to the Church Jumble if I don't stake my claim first."

"Go along with your little chum, dearie," said Terry unexpectedly, "and I'll start the whatever-it-was if you like. Nothing else to do."

"Oh, Terry, would you?"

"That's what I said."

"Do you want to show Annabel that thing? . . ."

"I hope I'm capable of peeling potatoes at the same time."

"Well . . . all right. Thank you. I'll bring them for you . . ." There was an interval of commotion; people were rushing to and fro with hats, baskets of potatoes, cups and saucers; people were saying good-bye and thanking Corinne; then the kitchen was suddenly and rather uncomfortably quiet. Everyone had gone except Annabel, who was perched on the edge of a chair, and Terry, who was rapidly peeling potatoes into a saucepan balanced on his knees.

Annabel now saw that he looked tired and cross; she herself wilted slightly. After a silence, she offered:

"Can I help you?"

"Thank you, I'm able to cope with a simple domestic chore unaided," he replied in his chilliest voice.

She almost apologised for her suggestion, but restrained herself, and waited. He said tersely:

"There's a blue air-letter form on the desk in my room. Perhaps you'd bring it?"

"Of course . . ." She returned quickly with the form in her hand, and perched on her chair again.

"Well, read it. It's self-explanatory."

"I wonder if I should?" she hesitated.

"By no means, if you don't wish to."

His fingers flickered efficiently up and down, and

potato peel scattered limply on to the newspaper laid on the floor beside his chair. He did not look up, but Annabel could see how white his face was, and that those pinched greenish shadows had returned. She did not risk more inquiry, but carried the air-letter to the window.

"The second paragraph," indicated Terry, without looking round.

The second paragraph; it began, in neat, cursive writing:

"How odd your indirectly coming across Powell-Duncan; yes of course I remember him, is he still as handsome? Rather the Tyrone Lower Type. I can't answer your rather vague question properly; after all, I haven't seen the man for about six years. I dare say he's improved. He was amusing, you know, but a bit of a sadist. All that crowd was the same. The row about Addleworth was all pretty sordid. They seemed to decide he wasn't the Right Type, I can't remember why; he was rather repulsive and nauseatingly pi, and saw himself as a Christian martyr, so I expect P.-D. and Co thought they'd give him his money's worth. He asked for it, in both senses! I think he must have been a bit loopy to begin with; in the end he painted red blobs on the palms of his hands and went wailing up and down the High on a Sunday morning, and they sent him home. Really it all makes one feel distinctly ill. But it's an open question how far P.-D. and his louts accelerated the process. I rather took the view that a little louse like that ought to be treated with mere aversion; P.-D., on the other hand, affected to believe that by exposing this idiocy they had acted as public benefactors. He sets a low value on human life as such; but I don't imagine that's constant with him. You said he was

engaged? What ho. I'm now resigned to spinsterhood, so can't wring out a tear. I pity his wife in a way.

"I had a Christmas card from Barbara this year; what do you think of that? They're still living in Toronto but . . ."

The topic had changed. Annabel folded the letter carefully and stood undecided, holding it.

"Well?" said Terry.

"Thank you for showing me. Thank you for asking Bridget, too."

"Not very consoling, I'm afraid."

"Well . . . In a way, I'd rather know as much as possible about something that worries me."

"Would you? Does it still worry you?"

"Yes. It does."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. I still don't know very much about what happened. But that isn't what . . . Oh dear."

"Will you recite the story to your sister?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, then; what's the fuss about?"

"It's difficult. . . . You see it's none of my business, in a way."

"That observation is rather tardy."

"Yes—I know; I've known that all along. But don't you think, really, that we are responsible for each other—whether we like it or not?"

"Being a prefect seems to have gone to your head."

She was silent.

"If your sister is perfectly happy, it seems unfortunate that you can't allow yourself to be so."

Unwillingly, after another silence, she admitted: "I don't think Nicola is 'perfectly happy' just now."

"Oh. Why not?"

"Well, of course I can't say. She's just got into the dumps, somehow."

"Do you hope to rescue her by passing on Bridget's remarks?"

"No. But, you see, with Nico, I sometimes think she'd much rather know *something*. She's awfully apt to worry just about nothing, at times, and that's a pity, because it gets all screwed up in her and just moulders."

"H'm. You think it would ultimately cheer her up to be told she is about to marry a sadist?"

"Oh, you're exaggerating—Bridget only says 'a bit of a sadist'. And anyway, that's only Bridget's opinion; she might be as prejudiced as anyone else."

"As whom?"

"Well . . . me, for instance."

"You're prejudiced?"

"In this sense, I suppose I am; you see, I do think that this kind of cruelty is hateful. Well, I mean, supposing that it's all as Bridget says."

"But where does your opinion come into it?"

* Annabel struggled with this for some moments and then broke out angrily: "I don't know. It doesn't. I don't mean it to. But Nico seems to be *blaming* me for something."

"Why should she?"

"I don't know. But I have a horrid feeling that she senses my distrust of Aubrey."

"Even so, why should she hold you to account for it, as long as she trusts the man herself? That is, if she does."

* "Oh, heaven knows. That's why I can't think what to do. It's just on my conscience that I know something about Aubrey; so I feel that Nico guesses that; so I feel I might as well tell her *what* it is, rather than let her go on fretting."

"Or, let her go on blaming you."

"She'd blame me if I told her. It will be the same for me in either case."

Terry selected another potato and said: "I find it tiresome to conduct a conversation with someone standing behind me."

"I'm sorry." She came slowly back to sit opposite him. He did not look at her, but went on in the same curt tone:

"It's always possible that Nicola would prefer a vague worry to a specific one. Can't you leave her alone in it?"

"Yes. But frankly, she doesn't leave *me* alone."

"I doubt that."

"All right, you can doubt it," she retorted with spirit. He glanced up at that, with a twitch of an eyebrow.

"Thank you very much." He added inconsequently: "Who is Miss Bryce?"

"Miss. . . ? Our history mistress. Why?"

"I was recollecting what Gillian said about her."

Reminded, Annabel recollected Gillian too. She watched Terry for a moment, and moved restlessly on her chair. After some seconds she volunteered:

"Gillian and I have a lot of lessons with her—just the two of us."

"Oh. And I suppose Miss Bryce is not allowed to have any vague worries in your presence, either?"

"What do you mean?" Her voice sounded snappish—more snappish than she liked. To cover this, she said quickly. "Have you finished—shall I take away the peelings for you?"

"If you must."

On this doubtful encouragement she rose and bundled up the newspaper from the floor. She carried it out to the dustbin, noting as she stepped out of doors that the daylight was fading and the wind was colder than ever. Back in the kitchen, she noted again the hostile atmosphere, the pointlessness of the conversation, and Terry's evident weariness. She wondered when she might go home;

oddly enough, she felt obliged to linger; she felt almost trapped. Shivering slightly, she leaned on the stove.

Terry said nothing. He bent with concentration over the last potato, flicking the end of peel into the ash bucket. Then he picked a potato out of the pan of water and began diligently to remove a few 'eyes' that he had overlooked.

Annabel considered and rejected several topics of conversation, patted her palms cautiously against the stove's surface, and looked down anxiously at Terry's head.

I must say something, she urged herself. What were we last talking about? She could not remember.

At last she said: "Shall I take the basket of spuds back to the pantry?"

"I don't need a nursemaid," said Terry, with surprising venom.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

The silence deepened. Annabel looked round the room in search of something unprovocative to say; she moved her feet and wished Corinne would come back. But it was a fair way to Pauline's house; say, ten minutes; ten minutes there; half an hour in all. . . . If only Vera would happen to come through for something, or Mr Baker. But it felt as if she and Terry were the only living creatures in the house.

She thought of something to say, and drew a breath. "Did you hear that talk on the Radio last night about——?"

Terry, paying no attention to this, was just taking another potato from his pan when his hand slipped; he dropped his peeler, which rolled across the hearth and lodged at Annabel's feet. She saw him, from the corner of her eye, make a movement as if to retrieve it; at the same instant, she herself had stooped to pick it up. It was out of his reach—but, he was so very touchy about having things done for him—but, when it was right at her feet,

could she ignore it—and now that she had hesitated, he would know just what she was thinking—but why didn't he say——

These ideas flashed through her mind as she hovered for a short moment, uncertain; but before she had put her hand down to the peeler, Terry, with a deliberate sweep of his arm, sent his whole pan of potatoes flying noisily to the floor. Water splattered the hearthrug and linoleum, and white, knobbly potatoes rolled here and there under the table.

"*Christ!*" he whispered. Annabel was on the point of asking inanely: Why did you do that? But the sudden crash, and his bitter ejaculation, had shocked her into a strange half-awareness; she was conscious only of his drawn face and dark, blindly glittering eyes.

Then she ceased altogether to think, or to be even conscious. She was suddenly, somehow, lying across the wheel of the invalid chair, and her arms were tightly round Terry, and she was pressing his head into her breast. Even then, such part of her mind that was free to observe recognised only the texture of his tweed jacket under her fingers, and the wiry warmth of his hair against her cheek; and she thought distantly, without surprise: I've never been so close to a man in my life before, except Daddy.

This faint comment did not detain her. After an interval of suspended shock, she felt Terry's hand dragging at her wrist, and he drew back his head and stared up into her face. But he did not draw himself entirely free; his hands were on her shoulders and her arms still round his neck. Annabel was both terrified and encouraged by the intent hostility in his eyes.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, a little huskily.

Because she was so close to him, and because this incredible situation had arisen, there was no point in trying to be tactful—or even kind. She said simply:

"I was sorry for you."

That was the truth. He flinched slightly, but gripped her shoulders more firmly.

"And what's the use of that?"

"I don't say that it's useful. I know it can't help you. But in any case—it can't do any harm."

"How do you know that?"

"I just know." She did; without having thought of any of this before, she was quite confident in her own words. They were both speaking in flat, rather hushed voices, as if someone were asleep in the room, or as if they were thinking aloud and did not want their words to be held against them. They were speaking, in fact, quite directly. Annabel said:

"If someone really minds, it isn't the same as just being sorry."

"It can be worse."

"Well, it isn't. If I feel like this I just know it can't be wasted."

"Like what?"

"As sorry as I possibly can be."

He winced slightly again, but did not relax his grasp of her. "Do you always feel like that?"

"No. Mostly, I try not to be sorry."

"I thought so."

"Well, which would you rather?"

"What a damned silly question. Annabel . . ."

"Yes?"

"This won't do, you know."

"What won't?"

"Not at your age."

"What's wrong with my age?"

"I don't think pity and affection are stable enough yet. . . . They might come back on you, and you'd only be hurt."

"You mean I might fall in love with you?"

"You hit the nail on the head. And I wouldn't like that."

"I shouldn't mind——"

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said roughly.

"No . . . I suppose I don't. Oh, Terry . . . What can I do?" She stroked back his hair, frowning down at him. He said mildly:

"I never thought I'd let a woman do that."

Even the novelty of being called a woman did not take the sting out of that; she remembered what she had been thinking, this afternoon, about Gillian; she remembered thinking on another day, not long ago, that 'he might live to be about eighty . . . there's just no way round it . . .'

He moved his head under her hand, and she heard him say rapidly, into her shoulder: "When it first happened, I knew Mother wanted me to let rip—talk about it, face up to it—but I couldn't. Not then. After that, it got more and more difficult. I was damned if I was going to, until I felt tougher about it. But it wasn't only pity that I was learning to do without. It was ordinary human sympathy as well. So I supposed that was just a part of it. Well, so it is. I don't mind being in this bloody chair, you know. Really, that is the kind of thing one does get used to. You try going about in one for seven years, and you'll see what I mean. It isn't that. It's that I keep feeling I've left it too late . . ."

"Left what?" she prompted, as he paused.

"Oh, I don't know. I've forgotten. I've forgotten all sorts of things."

"You haven't really."

"Well, I wish I had. You know, I'm just damned if I'll adjust myself; that's what it is." He turned his head and looked up; he was half-smiling. "So when some determined young lovely like you comes hanging about the house——"

"Oh, I'm sorry—I didn't mean——"

"I know you didn't mean. That's just the trouble. That's why it just won't do." They stared at each other again, absorbed. Terry moved his hand slowly over her hair, across her face, and down to her breast. She leaned against him, quiescent.

"Do you mind that?" he asked impersonally.

"No. No. . . . When you're very close to someone, like this, it's different. . . . You belong, somehow."

He sighed sharply. "Well, it won't do," he repeated. "I can't ask anybody to belong to me, you see."

"But supposing—

"No. Be quiet. Get up." He spoke so curtly that she slid off his chair at once, rather alarmed. She knelt on the hearth-rug, warming her hands at the stove, not looking at Terry. He said in a more natural tone: "Now you will have to forget all about that."

"I don't think I shall be able to," she said slowly. She was shivering a little, and her ideas were whirling in confusion. It was as if she had been shown something quite new and unsuspected—a new mode of thought, a new mode of existence. "Terry," she said hesitantly, "what can I do?"

"About? . . ."

"About . . . you. Can I help—really?"

He was silent for a while. "If you were to fall in love with me," he said deliberately, "I should find it humiliating."

She looked round at him, startled by this choice of word. Choosing her own words at random, she said: "I don't want to make anything more difficult for you. And I expect that if I try to help, it's sure to. Make it difficult, I mean. Because when people get mixed up with each other they both depend on each other somehow. Don't you think? It isn't possible for one person to give things to another. The other person has to give something too, if

the giving is to be any good on either side. When people are sorry for somebody, they try to do all the giving. All you can do is sit there in your chair and be grateful. Well, of course that wouldn't work. But it's only because people have the idea that you haven't anything to give. Or anyway, that what you give is only kind of second-best—making a gesture. It's only because they can't see it from your point of view; so you have to keep seeing it from theirs. But when people really love each other, I don't think anything can separate them; whether they're on wheels or anything else. Oh dear, I'm putting this so badly, and being awfully tactless——”

“No. I agree with you, really. You're only saying that Love Conquers All, but you're saying it rather well, because you happen to have thought of it for yourself.”

She smiled shyly. “I expect it sounds silly, all the same.”

“It isn't silly. But neither is it practical good sense. I'm with you, in the main; that is, I agree that where there is love, it ought to bash obstacles out of the way. And it will, too; well, the only thing that is stronger is pride. That's a cynical observation, so I hope you'll come to disagree with it. However . . .” He was leaning back with his fingers together, delivering judgement with cool detachment; but suddenly he leant forward and took her ungently by the chin, turning her face towards him. “You'll just have to take my word for it that you don't want to spend your life shackled to a gentleman on wheels. Uncle Terry knows best. Now you might be a lamb and round up a few of those spuds? I don't want Corry to come back and think we've been playing bowls with them.”

“Yes—of course.” He looked, just now, older than Terry; serious and—yes, perhaps rather like an uncle. Annabel caught the hand that he withdrew from her chin, and touched her lips against his wrist for an instant. He jerked his hand away abruptly; glancing up, she saw that his eyes had narrowed. But he said equably enough:

"None of that, thank you."

"I'm sorry."

"Do you habitually go about kissing strange men?"

"Goodness, no."

"Well, be obliging enough to pretend that I'm a man, will you?"

She was not sure whether this was meant to be funny, so laughed uncertainly as she began to collect the potatoes from the floor. As she worked she remarked:

"Lots of girls do kiss all sorts of men. Kitty—our maid—always expects to be kissed when a man brings her home from the pictures."

"There's a refreshing absence of snobbery in that attitude. All the same, I shouldn't calculate that you're heading for the Kitty type. One never knows, of course."

"I wonder."

"If you do, let me know; than I'll permit you to kiss me now and then. But not till you're over twenty-one."

"All right. I'll come and kiss you on my twenty-first birthday."

"That's a date. What time of year would that be?"

"In September."

"Right. I'll have a bunch of Michaelmas daisies ready."

Annabel carried the pan of potatoes out to the scullery tap, washed them, filled the pan with fresh water and brought it back to wait on the edge of the stove. Terry was opening a tin of carrots, with subdued imprecations as the tin-opener slipped against the flange. "Are you staying for this supper that's giving you so much trouble?" he asked, without looking up.

"No—in fact, I ought to be off now. We're expecting an uncle and aunt this evening." She sighed, remembering this. Uncle Tom and Auntie Freda were not scintillating company at the best of times; and just now, with Nicola and Philippa both in their moods, the evening was not

"Are you having to screw in your patients' teeth now," asked Terry.

"Would you like me to call there on my way home? I'm just going," offered Annabel.

She wondered as she spoke why it had been so strangely pleasant to hear that casual phrase 'you two' used like that.

Heather had intended in any case to come up to London by the afternoon train on the Monday of half-term, because she had left a full evening's work behind her in her haste to get away into the country. After the Parents' Reception, getting away into the country was dire necessity; and the whole week-end had barely revived her. She was looking forward to visiting the Goodwins' house, though.

She had remembered Mrs Goodwin when she saw her at the Reception, though they had, as far as she knew, not spoken before. But she was one of the parents one did remember by sight; she was always one of those who attended the Reception looking rather at a loss, as if she had expected it to be a tea-party and not a scrimmage—or free-for-all—for the airing of grievances. This was not to say that she had no grievances; thinking it over Heather was not without a mild trepidation. Why should she be singled out in this way, and invited to the house? It had seemed, at the moment of the invitation, the most natural thing possible; just as if a friend of Heather's were saying, "Come round for a drink." But now, it seemed less likely. She had remembered that Mrs Goodwin was not a friend of hers; in fact, that they were strangers.

There was something about the atmosphere of the Parents' Receptions that would make one unable to talk freely to one's dearest friends; and, so far, Heather had had little experience of meeting parents—apart from her own—in their natural habitat. Miss Pearce had once told her that teachers ought to know as much as possible about

their pupils' backgrounds, even at the cost of taking a post holiday governess; at which Heather, understandably, rebelled, and Miss Pearce, softening, added that she herself had tried that only once, when she was young and earnest; however, in theory, she still considered it a good idea.

In theory. Perhaps there was too much 'theory' about the schoolteacher's attitude, Heather reflected as she travelled in the direction of the Goodwins' house on Monday. And perhaps there was just as much theorising on the part of most parents. There ought to be an exchange system. Except of course, she pursued without Alice, that very few mothers could take over a school labours without enormous preparatory work; whereas the majority of female teachers could make a creditable show of running a house without having to swot up the subject. A good many of them had to, as it was. Which reminded her that she had rashly invited two people to dinner tomorrow night, on a brace of woodcock that she had yet to pluck and dress. This recollection made her feel a little less efficient.

She arrived at the house feeling still as inefficient, particularly as she was unsure of her status, and had not planned with herself what line to take. She had vaguely supposed that this would be 'dropping in for a drink' with a friend, in outline, although with a stranger. But she was unexpectedly disconcerted by her first impression. Mrs Goodwin, who was alone in the first-floor drawing room, was welcoming enough; but she, too, seemed lightly at a loss; as if this might be a continuation of that Reception.

So, for Margaret, it was. She had had to remind herself that this Miss Barlow was not just an odd female friend dropping in, but one of the school staff, and therefore, presumably, different. But she had not been able to decide what line to take. She was wondering still what she might have let herself in for.

"Do sit down . . ." She waved towards the sofa. "What will you have? Gin? Sherry? I'm sorry no one else seems to be here. . . . My husband should be in soon, and the children are somewhere. . . . Philippa was so pleased that you were coming, but I'm afraid she's shy." She paused for breath, adding silently: So am I.

"I'd love a sherry, please."

"Good," said Margaret pointlessly. She poured the drinks slowly, searching for a good follow-up to the remark. "Isn't it cold?" she managed enthusiastically at last.

"Very," said Heather stiltedly. "I sound like old Turnbull, she noted.

Margaret placed herself in an armchair, passed a box of cigarettes across the low table, and racked her brains. "Have you been away for the half-term?"

"Yes; I went home to see my family."

"How nice. Where is that?"

"In Dorset."

"How n—— Is it? I used to live in Dorset."

"Did you?"

They were working hard, and studying each other. Margaret was a little ashamed of herself for being surprised that Miss Barlow was so well dressed—or at least so normally dressed. She had vaguely expected either navy serge or fussy feathers and arty-crafty jewellery. But that tailored suit, the hatlessness, the absence of frilliness—it was almost too non-committal.

Heather was admiring the room, and wondering why it should feel so prim when it was obviously comfortably lived-in. Perhaps she had brought the Reception 'atmosphere' with her? How damping. She noticed that Mrs Goodwin had kicked off her left shoe, and wished she might kick off both her own. But the gesture was encouraging. She persisted more cheerfully: "In what part of Dorset?"

"Oh . . . a little place called Cottwood; not far from Wimborne St Giles."

"I don't know that district very well; we live on the other side of Iwerne Minster."

"I don't know whether Philippa will appear," said Margaret suddenly. "She's in rather an odd frame of mind at present; it's actually a bit tiresome. . . ."

"The Upper Four age," said Heather kindly.

"I expect so." Why, wondered Margaret, must these women always *classify*—as if it explained everything. She asked abruptly: "Does she seem very attached to you at the moment? Forgive my asking."

"Well, she's very much in evidence about the lab nowadays." Heather added cautiously: "I like her, you know."

So, thought Margaret, I should hope. Or am I prejudiced? "I rather wanted to talk to you about her," she said vaguely. "But I can't quite think what I wanted to say."

"I don't expect she's best pleased that I've come here." observed Heather amiably.

"Well no—that's what I thought. But I can't see why." They eyed each other more sympathetically.

"You didn't go away at the week-end?" resumed Heather.

"No." They had altered course again; she asked kindly: "What did you do at home? I expect you were glad of a few country walks after being in London for so long."

"Well, I never did like walks much. I had half a day with the West Wilts on Saturday and collected aches in every joint."

"The West? . . . Hunting, do you mean?"

"Yes; my brother always tries to see that I break my neck as soon as I get home. It was a poor day, though."

Margaret sat up straighter, trying to adjust herself to

the idea that a schoolmistress might do anything so civilised as go hunting. "Ground too hard?" she suggested.

"It wasn't too bad; we had a thaw on Friday night. No, it was mostly bad management—and my own idiocy, in trying to take one of these ingenious short cuts——" She stopped, bearing in mind that hunting stories are as tedious as fishing stories to the listener.

To Margaret, the check served as another reminder that this occasion was not for the exchange of anecdotes. She said irrepressibly: "My father used to belong to the Portman . . ." but let the sentence trail away; she watched Heather a little wistfully. We might, she thought, have had quite a jolly time swapping hunting-stories. But I suppose we ought to be talking about other things . . .

She could still not quite think what she wanted to say. The two of them were, in some incomprehensible way, separated; they represented points of view that would not combine. But why not? She said resolutely:

"Philippa seems to be taking a great interest in science; at least so Nicola told me; she hasn't mentioned it at all herself."

That last statement was not intended to sound resentful, but Heather sensed the unformed resentment behind it. She smiled and said: "It may be only a craze; but she is very able, you know."

"Yes, her form mistress seemed quite pleased with her on Friday. I can't really see her making anything of chemistry though—can you?"

"Why not?" asked Heather mildly.

"Well, it just doesn't seem her line; it's a subject I always disliked myself." Heather deducted several marks for that classic observation; she would not have suspected Mrs Goodwin of such ingenuousness. "That isn't altogether relevant, is it?" she murmured.

"I suppose not; but what a ghastly career for a girl to

take up, after all—— Oh, I beg your pardon. I wasn't thinking."

They both laughed, and the atmosphere thawed again. "It has its happier moments," said Heather.

"Anyway, I *can't* see her as a teacher, whatever else. I don't know whether she's thought of that; but they mostly do, don't they? at some point."

"I suppose so."

"Of course, that's a really worthwhile job," added Margaret courteously. "But Philippa's too . . . I don't know. Annabel is the one who'll make a teacher, of these three."

Heather considered. "What'll you bet?" she said unguardedly.

"You don't think she would?"

"No, I don't. Though one can't safely generalise. There isn't a 'teaching type'—in spite of the popular belief."

"No, I daresay not. For instance, there's quite a mixture on the staff of that place."

"H'm. True enough."

"Have some more sherry."

"Thank you—I will."

"I wonder why the children don't come down. Well, Philippa anyway. She must know you are here."

"I'm sure she does."

"She isn't often shy; though she's very sensitive, of course."

"Yes." Heather wondered whether she was going to be spared the inevitable 'highly-strung'.

"Won't you have another cigarette?"

"Have one of mine——"

"No, look, there's a whole boxful here. Do help yourself. Yes, Philippa's always been a bit of a problem in her own way. She's unlike the other two; more highly-strung."

The temperature dropped again. "Yes," said Heather distantly.

"Though I expect all mothers say that about their children."

"You're quite right; they do," agreed Heather more cordially. "And they're all quite right, of course."

"By the way, what's your religious denomination?"

"Unitarian, on the whole," said Heather, startled. "But I'm afraid I'm not at all devout nowadays."

"Oh—I just wondered; Philippa is keeping a most savage Lenten fast this year, and I wondered where she picked up the notion."

"She might almost have thought of it for herself?"

"Weighty irony."

"I'm sorry." She was startled again. I like this woman, she reflected; we might have been friends—circumstances being different. How silly it all is; we can't be, with the ghost of that silly child between us.

"Oh, don't apologise—I'm sure she did think of it for herself. But it's always possible that influence can be exerted unwittingly——"

"Well, in that instance, mine has been more than unwitting. I expect it's all part of the basil-pot phasc."

"The *what*? That's a new one to me."

"Oh—it's just a private identification of my own; it doesn't mean anything. I got it from Keats' 'Isabella; or, the pot of basil'—d'you know the one?"

"I'm not well up in poetry, I'm afraid. Wasn't that the one about the two brothers who murdered Lorenzo?"

"Yes—and Isabella digs him up and puts his head in a pot, and plants basil on top of it."

"Oh, I remember. How macabre."

"Exactly. Well, it just reminded me of so many of these youthful extravagances. You know how the female nurses this grisly potful, and no one can see why—and if they had

seen why, I don't imagine they would have thought it much more reasonable."

"Well, I certainly shouldn't." Margaret tried to picture herself cherishing Noel's head in a plant-pot, and shuddered.

"But I sometimes think that so many people's emotions are rather like that—to other people. Particularly the young. It doesn't matter to them really what kind of a mouldering potful they cling to, so long as it's *theirs*."

"Oh?" said Margaret doubtfully.

"It's just one of these human paradoxes, don't you find? that everyone seems to want to be understood—but if you do understand them they seem, on the other hand, to feel cheated."

"I daresay you're right."

"It's just a thing I often notice among them, at Philippa's age especially. I think it's very healthy; they must be allowed to possess their own feelings before they can be expected to control them. That's," she put in heedlessly, "where so many parents come unstuck."

"Oh."

"And the young are incredibly versatile in the matter too; as soon as you winkle out one trouble and deal with it, they go galloping off in pursuit of another."

Margaret nodded absently, and took a cigarette. Over the flame of the lighter she said warily: "So you think I perhaps pester Philippa too much?"

"Good God, I didn't mean anything of the kind. Please don't take any of that personally. . . . I was just speechifying." Heather was evidently concerned; Margaret a little disturbed. She drew on her cigarette for a while.

"I think that's rather likely," she said at last. "All that about potted mouldering heads, you know. But that's the kind of thing that the Romantic poets were so prone to, weren't they? Lush melancholy and abandonment to grief——"

"Well, they were mostly adolescents, weren't they?"

"I suppose so; whereas Tennyson and Co. were just sheer sentimental."

"I can't stand Tennyson, myself."

"Lord, nor can I. It's the abandonment that excuses Keats and so on; but I can't do with all that staid pre-Newbolt tosh."

Here, in slapdash generalisations about English verse, they had common ground; they chatted their way through Browning, Manley Hopkins, and Louis MacNeice. Margaret interrupted herself to say:

"You know, it isn't at all peculiar to children, this nursing of things, is it? Heaven knows I do it myself."

"I think everybody does. It isn't only grief, either; like Olivia in 'Twelfth Night' watering her chamber with tears."

"No—I wasn't thinking specially of grief; just of one's own feelings, whatever they might be. There's a temptation to stuff them away and let them rot, while one's ostensibly tending the basil plant above."

"Yes. . . .Yes, I do see what you mean. By the way, what does basil look like? I'm no botanist."

"I've no idea; but I expect it's very pretty."

"Yes, it would be."

Margaret stared thoughtfully across at her visitor. This was all very well; it was all a very interesting idea; but it didn't make for progress. Granted that Philippa wanted to have her own feelings to herself—well, so she might; but that didn't deal with the question of those feelings; and while it might be a pleasing explanation for the teacher, it didn't help the parent. She eyed Heather in covert irritation. She, after all, didn't have to be responsible for the child.

Heather was aware of this renewed resentment; she wondered privately what caused it. She had probably been tactless. But all the same, she had shown that the

parent had the advantage of the teacher, in any event. Let Philippa keep her secret self hidden in a pot—still, it was emotionally within the parents' reach; but it was the luckless teacher who was excluded.

The only answer, she mused dolefully, would seem to be to get married. But I don't want to. I may be terrified of turning into an unwanted spinster, but the trouble is that I'm spoilt. I'd have to give up too much if I married—anyway if I married Richard, and no one else is likely to ask me. I'm past the age of optimism.

Or perhaps it was two glasses of sherry that had induced this gentle depression. She began to realise that she had been here for some time; that she was still as strange to Mrs Goodwin; that the barrier was insuperable.

The conversation drifted desultorily. Each was following her own irrelevant train of ideas; each, as it happened, wondering what it was that she kept in her own basil-pot. But in spite of their barrier, they were contented enough together; or so it at once appeared to them when Nicola came in.

She murmured some mixture of apology and greeting, poured out a drink for herself, and stood by the piano, as if undecided whether to go or stay. Margaret said:

"Where are the others, darli'?"

"Philippa's in her room; Annabel isn't in yet."

"Isn't in? I thought she was only going to Elizabeth's for tea."

"Yes, she was; but they're all in a flap about the Dramatic Society just now. I expect they're nattering about that."

"Why is there a flap about the Dramatic Society?" asked Heather, with conscientious interest.

"I don't know." Nicola's interest was palpably less conscientious.

"Something seems to be on Annabel's mind just now," said Margaret vaguely.

"I don't know if it's that that's been making her so impossible all over half-term." Nicola herself did not look entirely 'possible' as she said that. Heather suddenly noticed the diamond on her left hand, and remembered.

"I'm sorry to be so late in congratulating you on your engagement," she said. "But I do hope you'll be very happy."

Nicola looked down at her ring in silence. Margaret said: "Did you go to Derry and Tom's today—oh, well, never mind; we can discuss that later on. Nico, why don't you come and——?"

The telephone rang; Nicola was out of the room and down the stairs before the bell had pealed twice. Margaret offered Heather some more sherry; Heather refused, and said she must go. Downstairs, the front door banged, and Nicola could be heard talking rapidly into the telephone.

"Either Noel or Annabel," said Margaret, listening.

It was Noel. He came into the room pink-nosed and tired; Margaret tried to insist that Miss Barlow stay a little longer, but was grateful that Miss Barlow counter-insisted on leaving. What with Noel's apparent weariness and Nicola's fractiousness and Philippa's absence and Annabel's more thorough absence, Margaret was afraid her family was not showing up too well. She went downstairs with Miss Barlow, making inquiries about her flat in Baron's Court. Kitty was screeching horribly as she laid the table for dinner—presumably she was singing; Nicola was saying sharply into the telephone: "Yes. Yes. That's just what I said. All right. Yes, I still say so . . ."

"You must come again," said Margaret, on the doorstep. She folded her arms against the rush of cold night air. "I'd like you to meet us all. . . ."

"I'd love to."

"We seem a bit mixed-up just now; I don't know why."

"It will be all right," said Heather confidently. She did

not know what would be all right, or why she said so; but she was relieved by Margaret's smile.

"Oh, I hope so. Families are the very devil."

"I wish I had one."

Margaret was impressed; she imagined that spinsters were supposed to pretend they were single from choice. But then, she wouldn't have minded betting that Miss Barlow was. "I often wish I hadn't," she retaliated. They laughed at each other, and Margaret wished she had asked Miss Barlow to stay for dinner. It looked as if she might need support.

But it was too late for that; she watched the visitor away, and turned back into the hall. Kitty popped out of the dining-room to say:

"No plums."

"Well, who wanted plums?" demanded Margaret crossly, slamming the front door. It would have been considered ill-bred in her mother's time to vent one's bad temper on the servants; but, in these days, servants vented their bad temper on their mistresses, so surely equality obtained.

"You did. You said bottled ones with junket, and there aren't any."

"We'll have to have something else, then."

"What?"

"I don't know. See what there is in the cupboard." The front door had swung itself open again; the lock was faulty. Margaret slammed it anew, and Nicola from the telephone shouted:

"Oh, do shut *up*!"

Why she required silence was not evident, because she at once hung up the receiver. Margaret said: "Who was that?"

"Aubrey."

"I thought he was coming to dinner?"

"He can't seem to make up his mind."

Margaret opened her mouth, looked at Nicola and shut it again, and went upstairs. "Give me another drink," she said wearily. Noel obeyed. He still looked weary too; noticing the droop of his shoulders, Margaret crossed to him and kissed the back of his neck. "Would you like to be decapitated and planted under an aspidistra?"

"I'd love it. What are we having for dinner?"

"No plums. Why, are you ravenous?"

"I wondered if it would keep while I get on to John Harris—if that child's torn herself away from the phone yet."

"Yes, she has. Will it take you a long time? Anyway, we're waiting for Annabel; and Aubrey is supposed to be coming, I think."

Noel nodded comprehensively, collected his glass, and went off to the extension telephone in his bedroom. Kitty came up to say that there was only blackcurrants, and what time would they have it? Margaret said:

"Well, Mr Goodwin's on the phone, and Mr Aubrey and Annabel haven't come yet——"

"Aubrey isn't coming," interrupted Nicola from the doorway.

"Oh. I wonder what's keeping Annabel? Well, never mind, Kitty; dish up when you hear Mr Goodwin ringing off. Or when you like," she added recklessly, throwing herself into her armchair.

I ought, she meditated, to go up and see Philippa; but I don't really see why. Perhaps she'll enjoy having her own feeling alone, as that woman said. . . . A strange woman. I wonder how old she is? "Nico—is that your glass on the piano? *Please, darling, a mat under it——*"

Nicola swept up her glass and flounced out of the room. "Nico . . . do wait a moment . . . Is Aubrey really not coming?" But she had gone upstairs; her bedroom door banged.

"Merciful heaven," said Margaret aloud and piously to

the unexpectedly quiet house. She stretched out a hand to the radio, and lay back, listening, with closed eyes and no attention to 'Radio Newsreel'. Our observer, it appeared, had been to observe some extraordinarily noisy aircraft taking off—with extraordinarily brash revvings of engines—for some obscure destination. Perhaps some one was interested in this; Margaret sipped her drink and opened her eyes, preparatory to switching off the noise; she saw Aubrey standing in the doorway looking down at her.

"Oh . . . hello." She could not bring herself to say: I thought you weren't coming. Had she been half-asleep in spite of those aircraft-noises? Her fingers fumbled with the switch, and she restored the room to its comparative silence.

"Good evening," said Aubrey. "Did I wake you up?"

"No; not a bit."

"You look exhausted."

"I am." She remembered thankfully: "I've just been entertaining the chemistry mistress who is the idol of Philippa's soul."

He grinned sympathetically and advanced to the fire-side. "Was it a strain?"

"Not really; she's rather nice. But I was unsupported throughout."

"I wish I'd known; I would have hurtled here at once."

"I wish you had." She would have liked that. She and Aubrey already made a good team on social occasions; they had fallen readily into each other's idiom of thought. Now she cheered up slightly and said: "Have a drink."

"Thank you." He helped himself.

Nevertheless, Nicola *had* just announced that he wasn't coming. Margaret ventured:

"Where did you ring from, just now?"

He glanced round at her, half-apprehensively. "Phone box in the High Street. I was on my way."

"Oh. . . . Did Kitty let you in?"

"Yes. Let me give you another tot?"

"Heavens no, it would be my fourth . . . no, fifth. I don't know. But I'd start telling my life story at once."

"I should like that."

"Aubrey, what does basil look like?"

"Basil who?"

"Not who. It. The plant."

"Oh. I've never seen it; I'd imagine it would be purple."

"Why?"

"I suppose the Greek for 'king'—royal colour; what do you say?"

"Well, I'd picture it rather like an aspidistra."

"Purple aspidistra; like the Purple Cow."

"'Hail to thee, blithe spirit, Cow thou never wert. . . .'"

"That's it."

"Doesn't Nico know you've come?"

"Well . . ."

"I'll call her."

He looked down into his glass without replying. Just then, Nicola came in; she did not appear unduly surprised to see Aubrey; but neither, Margaret noticed at once, did she appear duly pleased. She put her empty glass back on the tray, walked to the fireside, leaned her elbow on the mantelshelf, and turned pointedly towards her mother.

"Why didn't you bring Philippa down to meet Miss Barlow?" she asked edgily. Margaret stared at her, bewildered.

"Bring her? But she knew Miss Barlow was here——"

"Yes, but she was shy."

"Oh—how dreadful—was she expecting to be brought? Is she disappointed?"

"She's in some kind of a state, all right."

"But . . . she could have come; I didn't want to make it seem that—well, I was leaving it to her."

Nicola sighed. From the kitchen came a slithering

crash; Margaret thought: At just such a moment, Kitty probably *would* drop the whole dinner service. The telephone bell chinked angrily; trouble even on the Trunks lines.

Aubrey looked from Margaret to Nicola, and remarked calmly: "Sometimes it's the best thing, isn't it? To leave people alone to choose for themselves what to do."

Margaret was sure that he spoke quite without secondary significance; she was the more appalled to see the look that Nicola threw at him. Oh, Lord, she wailed inwardly, this is awful. She stood up quickly. Whatever was going on between these two, she had better leave them to it; and she had better go to Philippa; and it might be as well to go and see what Kitty had smashed.

"We're having dinner as soon as Daddy has finished his telephoning," she said at large. "I wonder what's become of Annabel?" Without waiting for an answer she went out of the room, closing the door on Nicola's tense remark to Aubrey that sounded like: "You'd better leave me alone, then."

Climbing the stairs, she brooded dismally on the recurrence of these moods of Nicola's. Heaven knew what *she* had in her basil-pot—oh, blow Miss Barlow; that particular image would haunt Margaret's mind for weeks now. But, apart from images, there was definitely some trouble working up in Nicola; it was all very well to say that it was the natural reaction to the excitement of her engagement; all very well to say that she was young and volatile; all very well to say that engagements were always a strain; it was all very well to say all manner of things, but the fact remained that all was not very well with Nicola.

Philippa was sitting on her bed reading, and jumped when Margaret came in.

"Darling, aren't you cold? You might at least put the electric fire on."

"Yes. . . . I am a bit cold. It doesn't matter." She was

wearing her taffeta dress; had she changed in honour of Miss Barlow? Margaret, instead of leading up to the question diplomatically, cried:

"Oh, Pip, why didn't you come down!"

She dropped on to the bed beside Philippa, who turned to her nervously. "Did you want me to?"

"I wanted you to do just as you liked, my dear."

"I . . . I stayed up here."

"So I noticed." There was a pause; Philippa fidgeted with her book. She seemed to be about to say something, but instead merely sighed.

Margaret said briskly: "I think Miss Barlow is very nice."

"Oh—*do* you?" Philippa beamed radiantly. "I hoped you'd like her. What was she wearing?"

"A dark-green suit and a yellow blouse. And she drank sherry, not gin. And she said she went hunting on Saturday, and it made her stiff. And she doesn't like Tennyson." Philippa was drinking this in, fascinated. "Go on," she urged.

"Go on with what?"

"What else you said. Was it just you and her?"

"She. Yes; no one else."

"I thought Annabel was there perhaps."

"No, she isn't back from Elizabeth's yet."

"Well, go on."

"Let me see. . . . We talked about you, a bit."

"Oh. I'd rather not hear about that, if you don't mind."

"That's awfully restrained of you. . . . Darling, why didn't you come down?"

"I was going to. Then I was shy."

"I see. . . . Nico said you were in a state."

Philippa's face clouded. She fidgeted again with her book. "Well, I don't wonder. She's in a state herself; that's what's the matter."

"What kind of a state?" prodded Margaret cautiously.

"I don't know. I don't know, Mummy. Oh dear, I wish she wouldn't be so . . ."

"So what?"

"Kind of miserable. What's wrong with her? You don't think she . . . she and Aubrey are. . . ?"

Margaret shook her head. In one way, she was relieved by this conversation: It seemed that Philippa had at any rate coped with Miss Barlow's visit to her own satisfaction. Possibly this remaining upstairs had something to do with the Lenten abstinence—or possibly it was just from natural diffidence—but it was not about Miss Barlow that she was 'in a state'. Margaret, testing this assumption, asked:

"If I ask Miss Barlow to come another time, will you come and talk to her?"

"I might. I think so. Only, do you know, sometimes, it's nicer to have things happening kind of . . . round the corner."

Margaret pondered. "'O the brave music of a distant drum!'" she quoted.

"Is that in a poem?"

"M'm. I'll show it to you. . . . Well, I'm glad you aren't disappointed—are you?"

"What about?"

"About not seeing Miss Barlow."

"Good God, no. She was only just downstairs——"

"Philippa, you really must *not* swear."

"Sorry. Sometimes it doesn't feel like swearing, does it? It comes out so easily."

"That's just the trouble. Now look, my dear, come down to the fire and get warm."

"I want to finish this—it's only a few pages——"

"Well, put on a coat or something." It struck her that the fireside might be still monopolised by Nicola and Aubrey; so she left Philippa swathed in an eiderdown, and went thoughtfully down to the drawing-room. Furious

chinking warned her that Noel was still tussling with the telephone; the drawing-room was silent. Its door stood ajar, and Margaret could see Nicola, apparently alone, gazing into the fire.

She looked at her mother blankly; it was a look of a curious quality, that threw Margaret into what could only be called a panic. She did not know what the look meant, but something interpreted it immediately, within her, producing this intensified helplessness of something-wrong-with-the-children. She walked calmly enough to her chair, and sat down, trying to think, but hoping for no more than that her face did not show her lack of success. She could not think; she was only protesting inwardly against the panic, protesting against this numb futility. It isn't *fair*, she clamoured to herself; I can only feel what she feels, but I can't feel *for* her. And I can't shield her from what she feels; I can only share it. And that's no good. It doesn't help. I must remember that.

She said coolly: "Has Aubrey gone?"

"Yes."

Nicola was holding a small object, tossing it from one hand to the other. Becoming aware that she was doing this, she threw the object carelessly into an empty ashtray on the bookcase beside her. Margaret saw the livid flash of a diamond and heard the ring of metal. She said nothing.

The telephone bell chinked again; Kitty was singing. There was no sign of Annabel.

"Nico," said Margaret softly, "what's it all about?"

"I don't know," said Nicola dully.

Margaret considered; at least Nicola was still sitting there, so perhaps one should risk continuing.

She selected a practical approach. "Well; when did it all begin?"

"I don't remember," admitted Nicola, after appearing to reflect.

"Well; who started it?"

"Nobody." She did not seem to resent this probing; indeed, she began to watch Margaret with a puzzled frown, as if Margaret were about to explain something.

"Neither of you said anything? Or did anything?"

"No. I can't remember. It's just . . ." She held up her hands and let them fall apart, in a gesture of defeat.

"It just seems to be—falling to bits?"

"Yes," said Nicola simply.

"But, darling . . . I wish I knew why."

"I don't know."

"There isn't a reason; there must be an *unreason*, then?" This piece of manifest nonsense caught Nicola's attention. She thought for a moment. "Yes," she agreed slowly. "There's a kind of empty patch."

"Where?" persisted Margaret.

Nicola sighed; her chin began to tremble. "There's just something I don't understand about him. I thought it didn't matter. But I can't tell him; and he's just so . . . uncertain."

"In what way? Unreliable?"

"I don't know. I don't know."

"Because, I'm sure I can't see how. . . . Of course I don't know him as well as you. . . . But, Nico darling, when you call Aubrey 'uncertain', don't you really mean that it's you who are uncertain?"

"Why need it be *me*?" cried Nicola, with sudden heat. "Why need it be my fault?"

"I didn't say anything about anybody's fault. Did I?"

"But that's what you mean. You're on his side."

"No. There's no question of sides, either."

"Well anyway; you just make me seem in the wrong."

Margaret thought: There's no question of wrong, either. But she did not say this, for fear of being merely repetitive. She stood up and walked slowly to the window, and back to the bookcase, where she stood staring unseeingly at the

titles of books. What *ever* can I say? she agonised, biting her lips.

"You don't blame Aubrey," she said at last, half to herself.

"He hasn't *done* anything—if that's what you mean. There isn't a quarrel to make up."

"Something just . . . negative has happened."

"No. Nothing's happened."

"Well—that's what I mean." She frowned.

"So no one can help," added Nicola desolately.

"But Nico," began Margaret with determination, "try to look at it clearly. When I said that you were 'uncertain', I wasn't blaming you at all. I just meant that there was a kind of gap, somewhere, in your relationship with Aubrey. And darling, you can always fill in a gap if you want to, you know."

Nicola turned in her chair and watched her suspiciously. Margaret hurried on:

"I don't want to interfere—I promise I don't. But I am so absolutely certain that if you can shoot these rapids, you'll get into smoother water. Because I *know* that you two love each other quite enough to make it worth anything." She glanced at Nicola and was not encouraged; but she pursued: "When I said that about filling in a gap, I didn't mean you to do it by effort. That doesn't work. I meant that if you love somebody, you have to trust him. No, I don't mean that it's a duty—I put that badly. I'm trying to say that . . ." She dithered, took a long breath, and plunged on: "Well, loving and trusting are the same thing. They go together. If you just *let* them." She wanted to say—irrelevantly, she felt: 'Be still then and know that I am God.' But she rejected this; one didn't bring God into conversations so glibly—especially not when tackling one's children. And anyway, she herself must be getting a bit over-excited; she didn't know quite what that incidental quotation had signified. But she

only knew that she was desperately intent on helping Nicola, somehow.

Nicola herself seemed at this moment desperately intent on fitting logs into the grate. Kneeling on the hearth-rug, she did not respond to Margaret's speech; she might not have heard.

After a pause Margaret said: "Of course, darling, it's your own feelings that matter. But my feeling—for what it's worth—is that you *can* trust Aubrey. In any way. In the end."

"Oh, *you* can—I dare say," snapped Nicola. She leant back on her heels, dusting her hands together. "I know you and he get on splendidly. When I came down this evening you——" She broke off. Margaret was struck by a new dismay. Yes, she and Aubrey did get on well—but surely Nicola need not. . . ? Surely there had been no. . . ? She was silenced; even her ideas were checked. She could not answer what Nicola had said, because there was no answer. She couldn't say: But it's just as well that I like Aubrey; nor could she say: Of course I don't like him—in any special sense. . . . All that she could say was that her own attitude to Aubrey was quite beside the point; and would that make her seem too detached?

She said nothing. Yes, she remembered; as Nicola came downstairs, she and Aubrey had been talking about basil—having one of their silly inconsequential conversations. But that, after all, was only a sign of good manners on Aubrey's part. He couldn't fail to be polite to his future mother-in-law because he might be worried about Nicola. But presumably, Nicola would have preferred him to . . . No; not seriously.

But Nicola wasn't expecting to be taken seriously just now. She was expecting to be taken much more than seriously. Margaret, anxious to end this present uncomfortable silence, came back towards the fire. "Nico," she said gently, "you must believe that no one's 'against

you'. I do frightfully want to help. I'm trying to make you understand what . . . what I should feel if . . ." She knew she was expressing herself unfortunately and was not altogether surprised when Nicola looked up at her scornfully.

"Oh, yes. I know. You always know best. You'll be saying next that when *you* were my age, and so on."

Margaret sat down, thinking quickly. "No. It isn't like that, you know. That's just what I complain of. I don't mind all this just because it once happened to me and I remember what it was like——"

"Did it happen to you?" asked Nicola—not curiously, but almost jealously.

"That's irrelevant. It isn't the similarity of experience that makes people understand each other. If it was, life would just go round in little circles . . . or don't I mean cycles? Anyway," she collected herself, "it's because this is *your* experience that I mind so much. I——"

"You mind? So how can you be so cold-blooded about it?"

"I mind," resumed Margaret, ignoring this, "because when something happens to your child for the first time, it happens to you for the first time too. I don't know why it's like that, but it always is. That's why older people often seem so cold-blooded, as you call it—because they know that just giving way to the misery doesn't make it better. They have to try to do what they can that's practical—with good advice, and with their own experience. . . ." She stopped, resting her chin on her hand and wishing sombrely that she had any scrap of good advice to offer.

"Good advice is no use. And other people's experience isn't either; except to themselves."

"I'm not talking from experience," said Margaret suddenly. "I'm talking from faith." She was beginning to confuse in her mind the whole question of understanding Nicola with that of not understanding Philippa;

and her resolution was wearing dismally thin. Whatever principle it was that urged her to preserve her detachment was ceasing to be valid. Or perhaps the negativeness of Nicola's trouble was drawing her, vacuum-like, to itself. She said wretchedly: "Oh, darling, what *can* I do? . . ."

"Nothing," said Nicola, without resentment. She moved across the rug and put her arm across Margaret's knee. "Mummy, don't you worry. I don't want you to be miserable too."

Margaret felt that she had won an undeserved, inexplicable, and temporary victory. She put her arms round Nicola and said softly: "It's just a panic. When we calm down a bit, we'll be able to think."

It was a panic; there was no other word for it; and by now, Margaret was as thoroughly plunged into it. They sat without speaking, watching the pale flames of the newly-built fire. Disconnected thoughts flew through Margaret's head: I'm no use at all in this kind of thing. . . . I once quarrelled with Noel about who had left my tennis racquet out in the rain. . . . I'm just no good as a mother, I can't keep my head above water in a crisis. . . . Supposing I had had a son; I expect he would have been called Nicholas. . . . Noel was always dependable, a bit too much so in a way. . . . Aubrey is dependable; I know he is. . . . I did try to be helpful, and look what happens. . . . Annabel ought to be home by now; Noel doesn't like them gadding about alone at night. . . . But even if I knew exactly what was the matter, it wouldn't be a good thing necessarily; when someone's in a panic, it's quite the worst thing to tell them what to *do*. . . . I ought to do it for her; but what? I am a fool. I'm sure anybody else would tidy up the whole situation without any of this fuss. . . .

Nicola said unexpectedly: "Oh, you are *nice*."

"Nice?" echoed Margaret, disconcerted.

"Yes. You're not like a mother—well, you know what I

mean; it's much better to have somebody who just knows what it feels like." She butted her face against Margaret's dress.

"But," said Margaret sadly, "that isn't much help."

"I know; that's what I'm trying to say. . . . When there's no help for something, it's so maddening when people say they *quite* see what it feels like but you must do so-and-so."

Margaret puzzled over this. "Isn't it better if people can see what to do?"

"No. Not when I'm feeling like this. It's silly to say that they understand when they don't. If they did understand they'd feel like I do, and that means they'd feel there was nothing to be done."

"Yet," added Margaret tenaciously.

"Yet," Nicola conceded. "You see . . . you do understand, because you feel hopeless too. Don't you?"

"Yes," admitted Margaret involuntarily. "I do. Oh, Nico, I do. . . . Isn't it dreadful. . . ?"

Nicola began to cry, quietly, almost deliberately, her fingers twisted into Margaret's skirt. "I don't know what it is, at all," she said shakily. "I here's just a kind of spot of emptiness, and it won't go away. It isn't important. Well, it isn't *big*. But it's just because I can't get rid of it. You see it's not that there's anything wrong with Aubrey, but just in a way that I'm a coward, and I daren't tell him all about this. It was really when we went to Shropshire that day; he won't tell me why he doesn't like his mother. He doesn't, you know. I daresay I don't either. She's awfully sweet and all that, but just . . . just useless. And then because there was this silly blank spot, you see, we had a little gap between us. I hadn't expected ever to have that. It's not the same as other things—it's got nothing to do with Mrs Powell-Duncan or anything; I shouldn't care if we never saw her again, or if we went to see her every week. Aubrey and I could cope with her—we could cope with anything—if only we could talk about

it. Even if we quarrelled, it would be a *thing*. Not just a nothing, buried away like this. It makes me so horrid and I sent him away, and now he'll never come back. . . ."

"He will. He will."

"I don't know how to bring him back. If I asked him, he'd come; but that wouldn't do. Or I could go and find him; but that wouldn't do either. I don't see how it can possibly happen."

"Nor do I," agreed Margaret, with desolate honesty. "But it will happen, darling."

"Hope isn't any good unless you can see how it works."

"No. Hope is exactly that—waiting for something when you don't understand how it will work."

"Then it's no use. It can't make you happier."

"Not at present; it isn't meant to do that. Faith is what does that."

"Faith in what?"

Margaret almost said: In Aubrey. But she avoided this as too remote. She said: "I suppose, in what joins you and Aubrey together."

Nicola lifted her head for a moment; Margaret knew that she was looking to see whether the ring were still lying in the ashtray. From the floor level, she could not see this. Without making further effort to, she dropped her head again.

"I have been a beast. I was a beast to him. I really was."

"What did he say?"

"Do you know . . . he was frightened. That was what frightened me."

"But theoretically, it's a good sign," pointed out Margaret bravely.

"Oh, yes. We're getting awful, theoretical, aren't we?"

"Never mind."

"Oh, Mummy, I am tired. . . . What time is it?"

"Twenty to eight."

"How funny. I'd forgotten about time. I seemed to be going round and round on one spot."

"Annabel isn't in yet; I wonder what's happened."

Nicola sighed. "I've been a beast to her too. But she is so tiresome."

"What has she been saying to you?"

"She doesn't really say anything. But she just behaves as if she thinks I'm a fool."

"I'm sure she doesn't."

"Oh, yes, she does; and I don't mind that. Well, not really. She just doesn't understand what it's like being in love, so, all right, why should she? I used to think she didn't like Aubrey. Actually I'm sure she doesn't, still. But I don't mind that."

"I don't see why it should worry you."

"Nor do I, you know. Only it makes me uncomfortable inside. I wish," she added hesitantly, "I hadn't said what I did about her to Aubrey, though."

"What was that?"

"Oh . . . I just said that Annabel had enough common sense to see when other people were making mistakes. But I didn't want him to think that she's been talking about him; he might be furious with her."

"Yes, he very well might. Darling, that was tactless of you."

"It's funny; I always have a feeling as if Annabel is in a way part of me. I suppose sisters do? Well, I mean, really, that I do respect her judgment. Not more than yours, of course—but I felt that you were much more on my side—no, not that. Oh, I do wish I could say what I *meant*. I'm quite wuzzy this evening."

"I wonder," said Margaret slowly, "if you weren't rather standing between the two states of young girl and married woman? So Annabel represented the one, and I the other. When you talked to Annabel, you were placing

yourself back a few years, and it was as if you reminded yourself of being a bit younger——”

“Something like that. But, no, it wasn’t a case of being younger; it’s quite the opposite with Annabel. She behaves as if she were about eighty-three and as wise as Solomon.”

Margaret remembered what she herself had thought, in this room, on that evening three months ago whereon Aubrey had first come to dinner. She reconstructed the scene now, glancing about her; seeing Annabel on her chair beside the sofa, Philippa in the hearth corner; she had thought that Annabel seemed the eldest of the three. Nicola said, taking up this thought unawares:

“And you said, yourself, once, that I’d be grateful for her common sense.”

“Did I? But darling, I didn’t mean you to take that as seriously as . . . well, I didn’t mean that I thought common sense superior to everything else.”

“Well, Annabel seems to.”

“No, don’t be unkind. You were rather like that yourself five years ago.”

“Not very. We *are* different. And even if I have been making her a scapegoat, I still think she’s much too smug. Anybody’d think she was one of the world’s prefects, not just the school’s. Look at the way she’s been behaving over half-term. Lumping around with that righteous expression——”

“Never mind that, my dear. She has her own troubles, I’m sure of that.”

“Oh, yes—who’s to be who in the Dramatic Society, and so on. . . . I don’t know why I have to be such a swine to her, all the same.”

“I should guess that you’re a bit envious of her—what you call smugness; other people might call it kinder things.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

"And I do think she likes Aubrey."

"You said that before."

"Yes; I still happen to believe it."

Anyway . . . it isn't likely to matter in future."

"*You* don't really believe that, Nico."

"Don't try to tell me what I believe."

"I'm sorry. . . . I should have said that I don't believe it."

"I didn't mean to snap at you again. . . . Mummy, why is it so *lonely* loving people?"

"I think . . . Is it because of the risk? Because you seem to put all your eggs in one basket?"

"I wonder if that's it. You see, without Aubrey, I don't just come back to being myself again. It isn't like it was before I met him."

"No : . . of course not. It couldn't be."

"Being in love changes you, doesn't it? Throws you off balance."

"Perhaps it alters your centre of gravity; but I shouldn't say that it upsets your balance—it doesn't really harm . . ." She fell silent again, pondering.

"It's made me very selfish, hasn't it?"

"No; a little bit, perhaps. Naturally."

"I like to be the centre of attention."

Margaret smiled. "Who doesn't?"

"Some people don't. They like to keep things to themselves when they feel them. Like Philippa."

"Oh, that's different; at her age."

"I can't see how. Would you call her selfish, as well?"

"Yes, I am," said Philippa. "I know I am." The others looked up, startled, to see her leaning against the door-post.

"Philippa—how long have you been there?"

"Just a few minutes—I thought you saw me. You looked at me."

"I was squinting, then," said Margaret vaguely. Per-

haps she had seen a darker patch against the dark wood in the corner, but had been too preoccupied to absorb it. Philippa now came across to the hearth, saying:

"I'm awfully sorry if I wasn't meant to be listening. . . ." She looked nervously down at Nicola.

Nicola shrugged. She fished for a handkerchief and rubbed it across her eyes. "Doesn't matter," she said curtly.

"I'm awfully sorry . . . if you're . . . if anything's gone wrong. . . ." Philippa added cautiously.

"It need not worry you," returned Nicola perfunctorily.

"Of course it does, if you're going to make Mummy unhappy too," flashed Philippa, with sudden vehemence. She sat on the arm of Margaret's chair and gave her a throttling embrace. "Don't *you* worry," she urged. "Either of you," she appended, turning back towards Nicola.

Margaret leaned wearily against Philippa; she could find nothing to say. Nothing had been said. This was all a maelstrom of unprogressive emotion.

"What were you saying about Annabel?" Philippa was asking anxiously. "Because she's all right, isn't she?"

"Yes, darling," Margaret assured her.

"Annabel?" said Noel from the door. "Is that what we're waiting for?" He came across the room, dumped his empty glass on the tray, and looked down at the family. Margaret saw his face change as he noticed the signs of stress; she shook her head slightly, warning him not to ask questions just now.

"We were waiting for you," she said.

Noel studied them in turn. Nicola, after a moment, raised her head and stared back at him; Margaret could not see her face. Noel said firmly:

"What we all need is some food."

"Shall I tell Kitty?" asked Philippa.

"Yes, please, darling."

Philippa ran off; Noel put out a hand to draw Nicola to her feet. "I'm sorry to have delayed the meal," he remarked. "Those Trunks services don't improve, do they? But I had to get hold of old John before he goes off to New York."

They went down to dinner. The dining-room seemed chilly and unusually quiet. Everyone was eating mechanically, as if from duty. Nicola said, out of a long silence, to Philippa:

"Didn't you go down to see Miss Barlow?"

"No. I stayed upstairs."

Margaret said casually: "Next time Miss Barlow comes, Philippa is going to entertain her."

"She looked a nice girl," said Noel.

Philippa glanced at him reprovingly. Margaret wondered whether that remark had sounded patronising. But after all, Miss Barlow would be a girl to Noel; fifty-six to about thirty-two? Margaret had been thinking about Miss Barlow, among other matters, during this meal; at the back of her mind was lodged the idea that someone sensible had been in this house recently, at least. Thinking about sensible people, she remembered Annabel again.

"I do wonder what's held Annabel up; it isn't like her to cut dinner like this without even telephoning."

"Discourteous," observed Noel. "We might be worrying."

"She can take care of herself," murmured Nicola.

Kitty arrived with blackcurrants and junket; on the plates, this mixture looked like snow on the coke-heap: cold and far from edible. Noel asked abruptly:

"Where did you say Annabel had gone?"

"To Elizabeth's."

"Who's Elizabeth, and where does she live?"

"One of her friends from school. . . . She lives in Kew."

Margaret began, all at once, to worry. At the same time she began to feel as if it were the youngest child who was

missing. This was not entirely because of her worry; it seemed to her, this evening, that Nicola and Philippa, for all their woes and perplexities, had touched on that pain that is the beginning of wisdom. It was Annabel, the schoolgirl, who was the youngest now, and who was also away from home after eight o'clock at night.

"Pip darling," she said impulsively, "you've finished. . . . Run and look up Elizabeth's number in the book, will you? I don't know her surname."

Noel nodded approval. Is he worried too, Margaret wondered?

"It's Walton; I know," said Philippa, departing. She came back to the door of the dining-room carrying the telephone directory. "There's two . . . Walton George and Walton, R. P.—they both live in Kew Gardens; would you like me to ring them up? I don't know which is Elizabeth's address."

"Would you? Please ask politely whether Annabel has left."

"Okay."

Noel, covering the cheese dish, said: "Afraid we're keeping the phone busy, Nico."

She looked puzzled for a moment, then said: "It's all right. I'm not expecting anyone to ring me up."

"I see." He folded his napkin.

Nicola suddenly smiled at him. "Daddy," she said, "do you remember when I had mumps?"

"Mumps? You had all sorts of things at one time and another."

"Well, this time was when Mummy was away—she'd gone to Granny's for the week-end and taken Annabel—Philippa wasn't born yet. I was eight; and we had that Swiss girl called Otilie to look after . . . And I woke up with these swellings under my jaw, and she got into a sweat and I cried, and Doctor Mason couldn't come till the afternoon. . . ."

"Now you mention it, I do remember a rather grisly day I had with you."

"Yes . . . do you remember what we did? You sat on my bed, and we played snakes and ladders for hours and hours. Till Doctor Mason came and said it was mumps all right; and then you rang up Mummy."

"Yes, I remember that," put in Margaret.

"Have we still got the snakes and ladders board?" asked Noel, looking penetratingly at Nicola. "I'll challenge you."

"You *are* nice," she told him. He cleared his throat and stood up.

Philippa came in. "It wasn't George, it was R. P.," she announced. "I talked to Elizabeth, and she says Annabel left just after six."

There was a short silence. "Meg," said Noel, "you'd better come and play snakes and ladders too."

Annabel had at first intended to go straight home from Elizabeth's house; but when she was alone on the frosty night, she decided that she must think. Thinking had not been easy this week-end, at home. She might at any time have gone out, of course; but that would have required a conscious effort. At the moment she *was* out, and the opportunity had caught up with her.

On an impulse, she took a bus in the opposite direction from home, and went to Richmond. Here she walked down to the river and spent some time discovering how difficult thinking is, when there is no specific aim to it.

I didn't mean 'think' at all, she concluded after a while. Anyway, this isn't what I wanted to do. I'm just wasting time, and I'll be late for dinner. I must go home.

The whole episode had been curiously insignificant, as well as unprofitable; as she travelled home, she wondered what she had hoped to achieve, and then, forgetting about

Richmond, she began to feel as if she had come straight home after all.

She even forgot about being late for dinner too. Perhaps she would not be so very late after all; she had not worn her watch today, and could not see a clock anywhere, but it did not feel late. She walked briskly along the street and into the square, trying to warm her feet, and thinking about Elizabeth's new dancing-skirt and whether it would be possible to make one like it from the old dining-room curtains that Mummy had offered her—for the Dramatic Society, as it happened; but a skirt like Elizabeth's would be nice to have. . . .

She rounded the corner of the square, walking on the inner pavement, about to cross diagonally to the front door. A man was pacing ahead of her, slowly, with bent head. She stepped off the pavement to overtake him, and he turned to look at her; in the light of the nearby lamp she saw that it was Aubrey.

For a long moment they stared at each other. It was Aubrey certainly, but he looked . . . different. He was watching her closely, but without recognition, so that she wondered for an instant whether he knew her. He stood quite still, the smoke from his cigarette threading up over his shoulder, his lips tight. Annabel opened her mouth to say: "Hello . . ." but no sound came; she remained with open mouth, unable to move, waiting for him to say something.

The effect of her aimless journey to Richmond had been, though she was not aware of it, to create—and insulate—a term of oblivion; so that she felt as if she had no need any more to think about the topics that had driven her in the opposite direction from home. Now, she was doubly bewildered, by Aubrey's unusual appearance, and by her own vague sense of omission. She took a step back, away from him, uncertainly; but she still could not have walked forward, or past him, or as far as the house.

In a strained, impersonal voice, Aubrey said: 'have you been?'

She shook her head; implying that that did not matter; hinting that she had nothing to say to him. Aubrey did not seem to want an answer to his question. He said suddenly:

"What the devil have you been up to?"

Annabel started. "I don't know," she said weakly.

"What have you been saying? You'd better tell me."

"Saying?" she repeated.

He came towards her, throwing away his cigarette. Annabel felt, for a moment, more frightened than she had ever been in her life. She saw only the cold emptiness of the square and this tall, determined, bitterly angry man confronting her. Putting out her hand behind her back, she seized the iron railing of the square garden, anchoring herself.

"Well?" he said harshly. "You'd better explain yourself, after the mischief you've made." He was staring through her, breathing heavily. The reference to 'mischief' did not make sense to her at the moment; but a weak spurt of defiance gave her a desperate courage, and she took the offensive. Lifting her chin, she eyed him narrowly.

"Are you drunk?" she challenged him, in a high, shrill voice.

He jerked back his head with a brief snort of laughter. "Is that all you can think of?" he retorted. "No. For your reassurance, I'm quite sober. Now perhaps you'll be good enough to answer what I asked you."

"You asked . . ."

"I asked you to explain yourself."

"How?"

"That's up to you." He moved a step nearer, thrusting his hands into his pockets. Annabel tightened her grip on the railing.

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Nonsense.'

She tried to think. What did he want to know—he said he had been 'saying' something, 'making mischief'; could he mean something about Nicola? But she hadn't said anything to Nico; nevertheless, this association of ideas minded her that she had, often enough, considered doing so; that she had had unwelcome anxieties about Aubrey—and, just now, it seemed that they had not been altogether justified. She had been afraid that Aubrey might be cruel and heartless. Well, anyone seeing him now would easily understand that.

There is a wonderful encouragement in being correct in one's judgement, even when it does not lead to safety. Annabel felt now rather like a martyr at the stake; her courage rose, stirred by recklessness. She said clearly:

"Do you mean that I've been making trouble between you and Nicola?"

From his expression, she knew that he had meant that. He did not reply, but his eyes hardened further.

"Because, I haven't told Nicola anything about you."

"What do you fancy you know about me?" he took up once. She was not sorry, in her immediate recklessness, that he asked this.

"I've only heard a story about you. I wouldn't tell Nicola, unless I was quite sure it was true, and was worse than it sounded so far. Then, if I thought she ought to know, I should tell her." After this, she half closed her eyes for a second, wincing. But Aubrey had not moved.

"What's the story?" he demanded in a flat, uninterrogative tone.

She took a deep breath. "I was told," she recitedapidly, "that when you were at Oxford—I'm not sure quite what happened. But I was told that you and some of her people were . . . cruel to another student."

"Dear, dear," said Aubrey, in limpid irony.

Annabel persisted, less confidently: "There was a student called Eg—Addleworth. He was a bit batty—anyway, these other people persecuted him. I heard that they were nearly sent down for it."

Aubrey said nothing. She felt that her narrative had been much less than convincing; she had been trying to stick to what facts she knew, and they were scanty. Forcing herself to look at him again, she saw that he was gazing inscrutably over her head, ignoring her and her story.

He roused himself and looked at her, without altering his expression. The silence lengthened. Of course, Aubrey would not feel obliged to explain himself to her—but, the same, it was he who had raised all this. So she waited. The railing was cold to her hand through her wool glove. At last she said in hesitant defiance:

"I didn't tell Nicola about that. And if I had, she wouldn't have taken any notice. But in case she did, I decided not to. Unless I knew much more about it. . . .

He was not listening. He swung round on his heel, swung back, and said grimly as if to himself: "It's a pity the social conscience develops so early in girls' schools. Altruism's a lethal weapon in some hands."

Something in that remark arrested her; it was perhaps the slighting reference to 'girls' schools'—a lot of people seemed to have a low opinion of girls' schools—but the sudden reminder was acuter than could be explained by an aspersion on her education. . . . The acuteness of some involuntary association was almost painful, and preceded with its stab the memory of Terry's observations on her 'Sixth-form sense of decorum'. Memory of Terry seemed, just now, like treachery; the last of her courage dwindled away, as if a weapon had been snatched from her hand. She leaned back against her railing and glancing at Aubrey apprehensively, was aware of another and even more disconcerting stab of mind, because the same treachery confronted her again, and outwardly

She knew where she had seen a face like his before—strained and white and with those narrow, unseeing eyes. In some extraordinary way, Aubrey reminded her of Terry; all at once, she saw why he looked like this. The whole situation revolved round her as she grappled with an alarm that had some of the despair, and the challenge, of disillusionment. Yet without her own exertion she felt new courage creeping in—courage not to defy Aubrey, but to encounter him.

Standing erect, she said urgently, in a more natural voice: "Aubrey, have you and Nicola quarrelled?"

"That's hardly your business," he returned absently.

"But you just seemed to be accusing me of making the mischief."

He glanced at her, construing this. "Did I? You say you haven't told her this picturesque story, though. Is that all the damage you had contemplated?"

"Yes . . . Aubrey . . ." She didn't know what else to say. The apology she wanted to make would not interest him, much less help him. But besides apologising, she wanted to say: This is what I thought you could never be like. I was afraid, you see, that you couldn't feel like this. . . . And now that he evidently could, her private consolation in the matter was hardly significant.

"Aubrey . . . I am sorry." He was still remote, swinging idly from foot to foot, his face set. Hearing her words after a pause, he raised his eyebrows.

"You seem to have infected Nicola in some way with your doubts, if that's any comfort," he said.

"Of course it isn't. I wanted to clear up doubts, not start them. I heard that story about Oxford quite accidentally, and it did worry me, but I kept hoping it wasn't true. That was why I tried to find out—and why I didn't want to find out, as well."

"It seemed important to you?"

"Not in itself," she explained, coming closer to him. "I

heard first of all that you threw this man over a bridge. It wasn't *that* that I minded. It was . . . well, why you did it, you see."

He lifted his head; for the moment she seemed to have attracted his attention. "*What* was this yarn?"

She told him again, carefully.

"H'm. But what the hell does it matter?"

"Only because . . . well, when people do a thing once they might do it again, unless you know what was behind it."

"It isn't strictly true that we were nearly sent down there was just a mild stink about it. But you are a little busybody, aren't you?"

He did not, she hazarded, sound quite so angry; though he still looked as unhappy. "Yes, and I'm very sorry. Nico has been rather cross with me—often—you know; I wonder if she guessed that I had something at the back of my mind about you? She said sometimes that I didn't like you. But that isn't what it was," she ended simply.

Aubrey took out his cigarette-case and, after pondering it, lit a cigarette. When he put his lighter back in his pocket he began mechanically to walk forward, and Annabel followed him. He said, accepting that she was beside him without looking round:

"Do you know, it's damned funny that that affair should have caught up on me like this. I thought I'd forgotten about it."

"And hadn't you?"

"Evidently not. I'm sorry to be so disagreeable about it. It was nothing to be proud of, of course. But I should hope it need not affect my career too considerably."

"I don't see why it should. . . . Only I didn't like to think you were that kind of a person."

"*What* kind of a person?"

She hesitated uncomfortably. She didn't like having to discuss someone's character to his face—especially

when the face was as formidable as this. Evasively, she said:

"I'm sure that isn't what Nico thinks."

He sighed sharply. They walked in silence to the end of the pavement, then turned and started slowly back. "God knows what she thinks," he murmured at last.

Perhaps there was, in this confession of ignorance, a latent appeal. Annabel might well have leapt to the rescue with a concise explanation of what Nicola (probably) thought, except that her own complicated and sensitive awareness was making her anxiously unconfident. She saw herself in danger of thrusting herself into the territory common to, and private to, Aubrey and Nicola and their exclusive relationship. However, habit was strong, and there had surely been a hint of question behind Aubrey's last remark. Annabel hesitated again, half closed her eyes as if to abstract herself, so that the light of the nearby lamp dissolved into wan streaks of silver between her lashes, took a slow breath, and plunged:

"Would you say . . . I wonder if it started when you went to see Mrs Powell-Duncan. . . . ?" she was beginning tentatively. Aubrey stopped dead.

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, I wondered if it wasn't just about then that . . . that Nico began to seem a bit . . . off-colour, somehow."

He walked on again without answering, moving more quickly. Annabel found that she was not afraid of him now. Oddly enough, her effort of barging into the middle of the situation seemed to have placed her outside it—or rather, given her a more objective view. Appreciating her own inadequacy, she still felt all the more involved, and obliged to do what she could to help, though quite uncertain of what this might be, and quite uncertain whether Aubrey realised who she was and what she was doing here. She felt incredibly young and helpless, and she hurried along by his side, almost trotting to keep up.

"That day was a bit of a wash-out," he was saying absently. "I wasn't much of a sunbeam. But Nicola . . . I couldn't really tell her why I was so rancid about it all."

"Why not?"

"Well, damn it. . . . Family pride; normal good manners. . . . I don't want her to feel she has to be sorry for me——"

"Who? Nico?"

He nodded. Annabel, puckering her brow, caught at this idea eagerly. Didn't want her to be sorry for him. . . . Why not? Nico was so good at being sorry for people. Perhaps Aubrey was rather proud, though, in things like that. . . . "Why should she be sorry for you?" she persisted daringly.

"She shouldn't. That's what I say."

They reached the far end of the pavement and turned again. Annabel thrust her gloved hands awkwardly into her pockets for extra warmth. Still in both physical and mental pursuit, she said persuasively:

"What was wrong with it, that Sunday?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Nico said," she hinted, "that it was all very nice. And a lovely house. And that your mother was very sweet. And there was a beautiful dog." She knew that she was bullying him, and was more surprised than alarmed by her own tenacity. She did not pause to wonder why she should be so intent on goading him into speech, but when he did speak, and his voice held a new note of response to hers, she felt that she had achieved something.

All he said, however, was: "Yes; she's a good dog. And it's a very pleasant house, for that matter." Halting under the central lamp, he added musingly: "I should have introduced the two of them sooner. Nicola and Mother, I mean. I'm sure they'll get on very well. But . . ." He turned to stare into the darkness of the branches stained thinly with lamplight, and went on rather stiltedly: "But I

naturally find it difficult to admit to myself that I'd rather they didn't."

Annabel thought of saying that Nicola got on well with everybody, but withheld this. An alert caution kept her silent. He said in the same tone:

"It isn't exactly that I don't get on with Mother myself. We agree well enough when we're together. Mother doesn't quarrel with people, in any case. Nor do I—when I just don't feel it would be worth it. . . . I simply prefer to have as little as possible to do with her. She can't quarrel, anyway. . . . Of course I could hardly warn Nicola about all this. She wouldn't believe me and would still be as hurt by it."

"By what?" Annabel inserted as he paused again. These disconnected remarks were preparing her for some dreadful revelation about Aubrey's mother. Did she drink—was there some guilty secret that Aubrey wanted to keep? . . . He leaned against the lamp-post, still scrutinising the trees without seeing them, and said quickly:

"She's an extraordinary woman. A bit abnormal, I should say. I don't ask anyone to take my word for that, though. I'm probably as abnormal myself, to be so lacking in natural affection—of course we always had Nanny, when we were children; she was the permanency—not that that excuses it. . . . All the same, you see, Mother has a kind of self-interest that's absolutely complete. What doesn't suit her scheme of things just ceases to exist. She loved us very much when we were little—Kenneth and me—but I should quite expect her not to recognise me if we happened to meet in Bond Street tomorrow. I think she wrote me off from quite an early age, because she decided I was going to be 'clever'. It was a bit different with Kenneth; he is, actually, more intelligent than I am, I should say; but he was always more devoted to the place—Garmston."

"The place where you were born?"

"Yes. Father brought us both up on it, rather; he was very hot on the training of character, and so on, and besides he was devoted to the place too—he used to make us plod round after him inspecting the hanging of gates and guessing at the timber-value of trees, and we enjoyed it enormously. It was somehow agreed between us, though, that Kenneth had his boots rooted in the soil and was going to run the place. . . . Anyway, when Father died he left it to Mother."

"The place—Garmston?"

"Yes. I can't think why; of course it was his to do as he liked with—no entails or what-not; I do wonder, though, whether he thought she would do what she did."

"What was that?"

"Sold it," he said briefly. Annabel stared at him in dismay.

"And then. . . ?" she prompted.

"Well," he resumed more energetically, "this was what made me—— This was what she did. She bought the smaller house—Elm Ridge, where I took Nicola—and she built up round herself a kind of miniature Garmston, composed of what she had happened to like—some of the furniture, and pictures, and some shrubs from the garden, she even had those moved. . . . D'you know, it was rather grim. She said she felt 'lost' in Garmston; I dare say she did . . . but she had rather a curious way of finding herself, so to speak. . . . She transplanted Kenneth too. I was about to go up to Oxford just then; the change didn't affect me much—except that I was fond of Garmston, of course." He stood upright with a jerk and began to walk again, adding with cold amusement: "She said that Kenneth had always been interested in the country, and gardening, so he could keep hens and bees at Elm Ridge. . . . She fitted him into the scenery, in fact. Thank God, it didn't last."

"Good," said Annabel vaguely. As Aubrey turned

again at the end of the railings, she moved in front of him and studied his face. The mixture of rapid speech and inarticulacy, both uncharacteristic of him, had impressed her strangely with his sincerity. She reminded him:

"Wasn't she pleased to see Nicola, though? Wasn't she nice to her? Was she pleased about your engagement?"

"I wrote to her, the day after I proposed to Nicola," he recounted slowly. "The day I came to dinner at your house. I remember the date, November the twenty-third. Well, Mother answered that letter on December the twelfth—which I also happen to remember, because it was my birthday. She sent a card, with a letter inside, and forgot to mention my engagement at all."

"Forgot? Just like that?"

"Apparently; because I thought this was a bit steep, and that perhaps my letter hadn't reached her; so I rang up that evening. She said she was so sorry, she knew there was something she ought to have said in her letter——"

He broke off abruptly, and they swung round to resume their sentry-walk. "Poor Nico," murmured Annabel.

"You see that?" He glanced at her keenly. "It was my fault, perhaps. I ought to have been able to give her a . . . I tried to keep up with Mother, you know; I went down fairly often, and made all the usual gestures. But it's more than unrewarding."

"It makes you angry," said Annabel, reasoning aloud.

"I thought I didn't much care—till I saw it from Nicola's point of view."

"I wonder if she'd mind, really?"

"She'd try not to. But how can anyone as unselfish—as trusting as Nicola *fail* to be hurt by being exposed to someone she simply can't make an impression on?"

If Annabel as a younger sister felt that such a wound might sometimes be salutary, she was at the moment able to respect lovers' points of view. She said only:

"But didn't she write to Nicola? It was a very nice letter, Nico said——"

"Oh, rather—having been reminded, she wrote a very nice letter. I saw it. I'm not saying that she's in any way deficient in manners, and she does know the right things to say on every occasion; only, to me, her sentiments are invalidated by her—well, her lack of spontaneity, to put it mildly."

"Oh. And she asked Nicola to go and stay—and you, too."

"Yes. Yes, she likes having people to stay. I was thoroughly small-minded about it, of course. I didn't want Nicola wasting her sweetness on infertile ground. . . ." He laughed, rather ironically, leaving Annabel undecided how seriously to take that last remark.

"But . . . Nico might have felt that you were . . . rather keeping her and your mother apart. Don't you think?"

"Well, so I was. As I said."

"You didn't really think she would be unkind to Nico?"

"No, of course not. Not positively so. I expect I wanted to be quite certain of Nicola myself before I would put her in a shop-window to be simply stared at through glass."

"But didn't you tell Nico all this?"

"No; I didn't. It just didn't present itself. Mother is the kind of person one has to see from the intimate angle. . . . Nicola wouldn't understand that. Not with a mother like her own. My mother is so entirely passive that it would have to be I who fell foul of her; but without the positive intention, either. I suppose I was afraid she might be the rock on which we would split. It is my fault, I know; but, on the other hand, I just can't keep up the pretence."

"Pretence of what?"

"Of . . . I think it's about Kenneth that I really jib," he said inconsequently. "But you know, one can't explain."

It's all so negative. One has to know the woman—at least, to find out that one can't. It takes a long time."

"Why shouldn't Nicola find out, in time?"

"Nicola? Well . . . I suppose she will," he admitted gloomily.

"You might tell her what you have told me. Why not?"

He frowned as if baffled. "Damned if I know. As I said, family pride . . . manners. . . . And people who grouse about their parents are—besides being breakers of the somethingth commandment—the most unspeakable bores."

"Those reasons don't apply in my case, because you aren't going to marry me?" she suggested.

"I suppose so."

"Well, that's silly of you." She stopped, looking up at him angrily and clenching her hands in her pockets; Aubrey faced her politely. "Now I know what it means," she snapped at him, "to say that pride is stronger than love."

"Do you?" he said, uncomprehendingly. She insisted:

"You can't keep anything from someone when you really love them. You could keep things that would hurt them, or that they ought not to know—but this, about your mother, isn't like that. It isn't about your mother at all; that's just what you've been *saying*. Your mother doesn't *count*. She's just wrapped up in herself. Only you're afraid people will think you're selfish, so you keep on saying it's your fault. How can it be your fault if your mother's like that? You don't mean it at all. It's only pride that makes you say that. And it stops you from loving things properly. You love that place—Garmston—don't you? Aubrey, listen—do you love Nicola?"

Coming after such a tirade, that question seemed to amaze him. He put out a hand and gripped her shoulder painfully. "You little . . ." he said blankly.

"Let go. You're hurting."

He obeyed.

Annabel said: "Let's go on walking; it's cold. Well, I'm sorry. I *am* interfering now, but I can't help it, because I do think you ought to be told. You *must* tell Nico all about this. It isn't anything frightfully important in itself; or it wouldn't be, if you were both on the same side of it. But you see Nico's so easily worried when she doesn't know about anything. She'd rather you murdered somebody and told her about it, than didn't do anything at all and let her think you had—I don't mean that she thinks you've done anything. I don't know what she thinks. I do know though that she's miserable about something or other——"

"So do I," he agreed bitterly. "She threw me out of the house this evening. And tried to give me back my ring——"

"Oh, Aubrey! Did she? Did she really?" She saw now why he had been hanging about in the square, and why he was so unhappy. "Well, *please* do something about that."

"What?" he asked with bland irony.

"Oh . . . I've told you. Tell her everything and **make** her see it. Honestly. Tell her you're an unfilial son **and** hate the sight of your mother, and she'll disapprove **no** end and love you just as much. And it wouldn't be nearly as serious as this."

"You're very stern——"

"I daresay. But Nico would always rather have a good noisy quarrel about something than just a situation about nothing. I don't care whether *you* would or not, but that's what you ought to do."

"It's very handy," he observed, "to be instructed in how to quarrel with one's future wife. It must be quite a factor in matrimonial affairs." He was smiling; whether because she was funny, she did not know or care. At least it indicated that he had cheered up somewhat. Moreover, she sensed that she had, even faintly, impressed him;

and, looking back on what she had said, she was a little impressed herself. They walked on again. She rehearsed her admonitions to him, partly to make sure he understood, partly to guard against his relapsing into gloom, and partly because she was of an age to believe that on intelligent observation of hers could be appreciated at a first hearing, and that a thing worth saying is worth saying again. They paced along under the glinting branches, their feet clapping quietly in the deserted square, their breath threading steamily over their shoulders. It was going to be all right, she knew. Without being able to disentangle this matter of Mrs Powell-Duncan, she was clearly aware of its nature. She knew that family complications are nearly always inexplicable to outsiders, and that when one was oneself part of the complication, it must be paralysing. But it wasn't, she decided, important enough about this woman. Annabel could see round the position, whether she understood it or not, and was intuitively persuaded that Nicola would too. As she listened to Aubrey she realised that this attitude of his mother was no less powerful to him because of its apparent harmlessness. It was going to be a difficulty. But, as she besought inwardly, let it *be* a difficulty, not just a drawback.

"I expect you must have helped Kenneth a lot though," she remarked sagely after a while. "He must have needed a bit of help, to get away from home."

"You've got us all summed up, haven't you?"

"Oh, no. Not a bit. It's only guessing. I find it awfully hard to tell what people are really like."

"That isn't the impression you like to give. . . . Who told you, by the way," he remembered suddenly, "about the affair at Oxford? About the unfortunate Addleworth?"

She was silenced for a while, as she reflected the affair at Oxford and the manner of her hearing of it. She remembered confusedly that Aubrey had reminded her of Terry

a little while ago, and recognised, just as confusedly, that her inner uncertainty about Terry had somehow driven her to the point of recklessness whereat she had tackled Aubrey like this. To think of Terry had given her a kind of courage—as if she had been talking to him about Aubrey; but to talk to Aubrey about Terry would be to reverse this process; it seemed impossible. With a strange constriction inside herself she said carefully and reluctantly, compelled in fairness to answer the question:

"My friend's brother was at Oxford while you were. It was his cousin who knew you, though, I believe." She did not know Bridget's surname—which side of the family was she on? "I only know that her Christian name is Bridget."

"Bridget? Not Bridget Baker?"

"I expect so—that's Corinne's surname too."

"Yes, I knew Bridget Baker quite well. St Hugh's."

"I think she was."

"She would remember that dust-up all right." He scowled, thinking. "Is that the kind of thing you *think* Nicola would rather know than not?"

"Well, you see, that's just what I've been wondering. It would be quite different if you told her, of course. What I was wondering was whether I should."

"H'm. I'm glad you didn't, I must say."

"So am I, now."

He looked at her sharply, but did not query this. "There must be very few people who haven't some kind of a past to live down," he said casually.

"Well, I suppose so. But . . ."

"You don't imagine I'd persecute Nicola?"

"Did you persecute someone, then?" she insisted.

"Well . . . Yes, frankly, we did. He was utterly loathsome. I do mean that. And we used fair means, which was more than he did."

"Did he. . . ? What was he like?" she asked, curious and apprehensive.

Aubrey's face tensed. "A prig run wild," he said shortly. "He fancied himself as some kind of champion of virtue in the place, and used to skulk about smelling out all forms of wickedness. Then he applied what was, to put it accurately, blackmail. He used to write anonymous letters to various people too. . . . He was fiendishly cunning; several of us had a sound idea who it was, but we couldn't pin it on to him. So we took the law into our own hands. Thereby, of course, playing into his, so to speak. He did very well out of being a tormented victim for a while. . . . Listen, this isn't a savoury topic for you."

"No. All right. So then, he painted his hands red and——"

"Who told you that?" he broke in curtly.

"Bridget."

"You asked her? She told you about——"

"I haven't met her; she's in Durban, you know. But she wrote a letter, and I saw it."

"What else did she say?" He asked diffidently after a pause.

She reflected. "That he did that, and went wailing down the High—is that a place in Oxford?—and then he was sent home. He was a copy really. You and your friends were all a bit sadistic. You sent him batty—I think she said, accelerated the process. You set a low value on human life as such. It was all pretty sordid and made her feel ill. She pitied your wife in a way. He—this loopy man—rather asked for it. Oh, and I heard—though she didn't say this—that he was thrown over a bridge. I think that's all," she finished thankfully. "I've got it in the wrong order, but it was roughly that."

"I see. A very fair mixture of the facts. Well, look, Annabel, I don't much want to tell you about it, just because it was all so beastly sordid. Bridget's right. She

wasn't altogether right at the time, though—or now, for that matter. You see . . . I will tell you this." They had come to rest alongside a gravel-bin at the corner; they propped their elbows on the metal and stared out across the roadway. "I think," Aubrey resumed seriously, "that there's something inherently revolting about a religious skunk—or maniac. By all means indulge an interest in the sins of the world, but not under cover of a zeal for virtue. Well, so far so good; that was our opinion of Addleworth, and we wanted to get him out of the place. But we didn't realise, you see, that he was genuinely unhinged; or I very much hope we would have gone about it differently."

"I see. But he was loopy, really?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm just giving you the outline because it was, frankly, unsuitable. . . . Bridget was among those who saw the game from the outside. I can see her point of view; she knew that we intended to hound him out, and she knew that he finally went beyond the extreme. But I honestly don't think we were responsible for that. Possibly we drove him to break out in his final demonstration; but even that I can't be sure of. The details were suppressed—one heard that his family took a hand, and removed him privily—his father was some rather high-up official in something, I believe; poor chap. . . . It happened that at the time he (Addleworth, I mean) was putting up a remarkably poor show academically—and there were tales about some girl—" He stopped, then took up again with: "Never mind. It all came out in the wash, I daresay. . . . But since we've gone so far, I might as well tell you that I'm by no means as blameless as I've perhaps made out. At least, when I'm called 'sadistic' it has quite enough force to make me unrighteously angry. . . ."

"Why?" she prompted gently.

"About that bridge incident. We were only clowning,

in the beginning. It was quite a while before the end, by the way—almost a minor skirmish. We had this little weasel up on the parapet of Folly Bridge one afternoon, and we were trying to get out of him . . . well, some facts that involved a girl we knew in L.M.H. But that doesn't matter. Well, we saw a man we knew too coming along in a boat, so we said let's drop him in and Beckwith can pick him up. . . ." He hesitated, then went on more smoothly: "I've never actually told anyone this before, but it might not be a bad idea to. You see, I was actually holding the little swine just then—it was I who dropped him in. I meant to. Just as I let go, I saw that he was absolutely sweating with fright. I rather enjoyed it."

Annabel considered this. She watched his hands as he unconsciously spread them in the gesture of releasing a burden, and saw his fingers against a background of inky ripples far below. "That's what Bridget meant by 'sadistic'?"

"Probably. It was an impulse of sheer inexcusable cruelty."

"But," she reasoned, "it might have been the same with anybody else you happened to be holding—I mean, it was just the impulse to drop somebody into a river? Or was it specially that little man?"

"I think it would have been the same with anyone, just at that moment."

"But it had nothing really to do with the rest of the affair?"

"I suppose not; but I've never been able to disentangle them."

"You should," she told him sententiously.

He laughed shortly. "Thank you. Forgive me for telling you all this—it's ancient history in a way."

"Well, not truly. Or you wouldn't still mind so much."

"How do you know I mind?" His tone was only half-teasing.

"Because you get it mixed up; you seem to want to take the blame for as much of it as you can, to make up for what you did. Like with your mother," she added vaguely, and disconcertingly. Aubrey, shrugging, stood up, and walked away. Soon he stopped and waited for her, and said as she came up:

"Once when I was about ten, something rather the same happened; this time Kenneth and I cut Sunday school and went climbing about the stable roofs looking for swallows' nests, with one of the farm-workers' kids. I thought it would be amusing to push this other kid off the roof into the manure heap; so I did. But of course he was dressed for Sunday school in his only decent suit, and he ruined it, and as it happened he was going into the town that week to sit some scholarship exam. He had to go in his old corduroys. Well, he failed the exam——"

"Aubrey—don't be *silly*." She stopped him, her hands on his elbows. "You can't say that he failed because——"

"No, I don't; not seriously. But that doesn't affect the feeling. . . . Well, never mind. I needn't bore you with all this."

"It doesn't, a bit. I know what it feels like, I think. Only I'm not as sensitive as you; I don't take the blame. Once Nicola had a new pair of shoes—terribly elegant ones, you know—and she was saving them to go to tea with Granny in; I hid them in the back of the coal cellar, and then I just sat pretending to read a book, and watching her hunting for them."

"That's a refined female form of cruelty," he said, smiling. "How old were you?"

"About nine. . . . I think, with girls," she said pensively, "physical cruelty is taken much more as a crime. For instance, if a girl bashes another girl on the head with a heavy book, it's like attempted murder, but in boys' stories—like *Stalky & Co.*, they seem to do that as a matter of course."

"I shouldn't take 'Stalky' too much as a standard. . . . But I suppose you're right."

"I'm sure lots of people would have dropped people off bridges if they'd happened to think of it."

"You're very comforting."

"I wish I was." They walked for some time without speaking, Aubrey smoking, Annabel playing with the key-ring in her pocket. The trees and railings, as they re-passed, seemed like the backcloth to a play, oddly unchanging in view of the variety of human experience that paraded before it. The permanence of the background made it irrelevant, as all backgrounds were irrelevant to the preoccupation of the strolling couple. Aubrey asked at one point what Bridget was doing in Durban, and commented that she was the kind of person who might be all the better for being dropped over a bridge; Annabel laughed at that, but was increasingly conscious of an uneasiness within herself that kept intruding on her efforts at thinking about Aubrey and Nicola. When he made some observation about undergraduate friendships in general, she asked shyly:

"When you love somebody, of course you want them to *like* you as well, don't you?"

"Yes; of course."

"But if someone liked you without loving you . . . that would be better than loving you if you didn't want them to?"

He looked puzzled. Aware that her questions were irrelevant, but unable to prevent herself from risking self-exposure, she enlarged:

"How could it be humiliating for somebody to love you?"

"Good heavens; that depends a lot . . . I can't see that it ever could be; unless perhaps you despised the person excessively."

"Oh." She was daunted for a moment, but resumed:

"I can't see that it can *ever* be wasted, when somebody loves somebody else."

"Well, that depends again, doesn't it?"

"For instance, with Nicola—being in love has made her kind of different. I think that even if she didn't have you any more, she'd still be different. As if she's started something and can't stop it again."

"She had a damned good try this evening."

"No, she *can't*. Don't you see? Loving somebody isn't a thing you do intentionally; it just happens."

"It can just stop happening, then, surely?"

"It might. But only if there's a kind of interruption. It isn't the loving that stops. . . . Oh, I'm sorry; I can't say any of this."

"You're doing rather well."

"I'm only trying to tell you—I think," she interrupted herself, in a flash of understanding. "I'm just trying to *will* the two of you together—to put my weight on both sides; but really, I do see that nobody but you two can do anything about it."

"It's nice of you to care about it," he said, without irony.

"Well, when two people *can* get married . . ." She checked herself and kicked at the edge of a paving-stone.

"You're all for matrimony?" he asked, amused.

"I think I am; but I do see that I'm prejudiced just at the moment," she said gravely.

He looked at her; his amusement faded. "What's all this about?" he asked.

"Nothing." She glanced about her, suddenly rather frightened and conscious of the coldness of the night.

"Are you in love yourself, by any chance?"

Annabel, to her own astonishment and confusion, burst into tears. That question, before she had even quite heard it, seemed to explode inside her ribs and send the bare lamplit branches rippling upwards like flames. Aubrey said something else, but she shook her head in

denial, without having heard what he said, rubbing the back of her hand across her face and struggling to steady her breath.

"I'm s-sorry. . . . I didn't mean——"

"I didn't mean, either," he said gently. "I'm most horribly sorry. . . . Hankie?"

She accepted this gratefully. He watched her with concern as she applied it, and as she managed a watery smile, grinned in relief.

"When you smile, you look like a Hümme! cherub."

"Bridget said," she retorted unsteadily, "that you look like Tyrone P-power."

"I'm glad she can say something in my favour—though it might not be; a question of taste. . . . My dear Annabel, I've been beastly clumsy. What can I do about it?"

"It's all right; I'm not in love at all."

"Oh."

"I don't know why I was so silly."

"Would it help to tell me what you can? It would be fair exchange, you know."

"It might not be." She sighed, and then flung out: "You didn't really mean that about despising somebody who loves you when you don't want them to?"

He looked at her intently and, as she waited for him to answer, she suddenly saw a new train of ideas running through this recent exchange—ideas that might be quite apparent to Aubrey; alarmed, she said hurriedly: "I'm not in love with you, you know—a bit. That isn't it at all."

Perhaps this possibility had not occurred to him after all; he did not seem conspicuously relieved; he nodded, but still watched her closely.

She went on, not really wanting to tell him, but full of the rather light-headed recklessness of her recent mood: "It was someone else; he did say that about being humiliated; I dare say he does despise me—but you see he couldn't marry me, even if he wanted to."

"Why not?" asked Aubrey severely.

"He . . ." She dithered for a moment, and then began to talk about Terry. Talking about him, which had seemed impossible, now became an imperative necessity. Words tumbled out of her, as if the sincerity with which she had listened to Aubrey were suddenly springing back in her own story. The effort she had made to understand his plight made this outpouring quite effortless. At the same time, as she talked, she heard her own words clattering along like a little thread—like a train seen from an enormous height, clattering its way through vast swampy territories. The territory itself was all uncertainty, but, as she had known that uncertainty in Aubrey, he must recognise it in her. With the position reversed like this, she found time to wonder fleetingly how she had dared to give Aubrey advice, and to be so confident in doing so; perhaps it was only when one was in chaos oneself that it seemed so unconquerable? ". . . but I don't think I love him—anyway, not as Nico loves you," she ended. Aubrey narrowed his eyes for an instant but did not comment. "But he said . . . he said, I might fall in love with him. And you see, he doesn't want me to."

"How long is it since he had this accident?"

"About seven years."

"It's incurable?"

"Yes, everyone says so."

Aubrey tightened his lips grimly. "Poor brute. . . . I think I remember him. He was just up, and I met him with Bridget one evening in the Stowaway. He was in Queen's, I believe?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Dark; thin; he'd accidentally stolen a book from Blackwell's that day—I can't think how he got away with it, but he just walked out with it under his arm, thinking he was in a library."

She repeated: "He walked out. . . . ?" How incredible,

and disturbing, to meet someone who had seen Terry walk. Well, of course, so had Corinne and all his family—but that was different. “What a funny thing to remember,” she said dreamily.

“It stuck, for some reason. But I never heard of him after that—I never heard about his . . . accident.”

“It was after his first term.”

“Annabel . . . Do you know what you really feel about him?”

“No,” she said honestly. “I can’t sort it out at all. I only know what he said.”

“He didn’t . . . No, that’s none of my business. Let’s walk again, shall we? You look cold.” They walked silently. Aubrey resumed after a while: “It does look as though you can only help him by not loving him; doesn’t it?”

“Even if I do love him?”

“It’s too difficult for you,” he said half-angrily. “You said yourself—and you’re right enough—that one can’t help these things.”

“And he has to have nobody to love him, when he really needs somebody so much—more than other people, in a way.”

“I know; it’s an enormous problem. But you see, when he sees himself as an object of pity—whether you actually pity him or not—he feels that he loses the initiative. He needs the freedom to choose that everyone else has—in theory, at least.”

“Yes. He didn’t choose me, do you mean? But I do see—he can’t get away, in a sense. And if he really doesn’t *want* to be loved . . . in that way . . . But still, I could love him in a kind of general way—not pitying him, you know, but really being kind—he couldn’t mind that? Surely?”

“He evidently minds just now; because he knows that at your age it’s too much to expect you to discriminate. Well, at any age one would have to be uncommonly

level-headed. But he has the guts to see that he can't risk entangling you. . . . Do you know," he said suddenly, "if he were genuinely fond of you, he might as likely as not send you away; and, as well, you can let him have the pride of choice. That would be a terrific thing for you to do. . . ."

"You see," she said with difficulty, "I hadn't begun to think about falling in love with anybody. And now it's all happened back to front, and it's as if I must make up my mind about things all in the wrong order. About whether I want to get married, and . . . and have children, and things like that, when of course I don't *know* yet. But with Terry, I can't just potter along till I find out."

"Yes; that's the problem. But don't try to tackle it all at once; he won't expect that. He will want to see that you haven't been hurt. And besides—there's a very narrow margin between female kindness and female provocative-ness, you know. He's in many ways at your mercy. Oddly enough—he's appealing to your pride, isn't he? Perhaps pride *has* to be stronger than love, in some cases."

"Oh. I suppose I see that. . . . Before that time I told you about, you know, I didn't even like him very much."

"This—the incident of the potatoes—was just the bang-off beginning of it all?"

"Yes; just like that."

He reflected, halting to balance himself on the edge of the pavement. Looking up quickly, he asked: "Do you like him now?"

"That's what I can't disentangle. I think perhaps I understand him better, at any rate."

"I wonder if you do. . . ?"

"Well, I don't think I should be afraid of him any more—if that's the same thing?"

"Ah—well, let's put it this way: you've discovered his vulnerability. And he knows that. So you mustn't let

him down. I think that if you honestly want to be kind to him, now, you'll find the best way somehow—you'll be able to handle him, and I don't mean that in any patronising sense. Because you see," he added emphatically, "you are on the same side as he is, now; you're suffering from his infirmity, so to speak—in much the same way as he is. You're the first person to achieve that."

Annabel considered this, at once appalled and stimulated. "Oh, Aubrey, do you think so? Yes, I believe you're right. I must think. . . . And I might chuck it all away, just because I was frightened for him."

"And frightened for yourself, if you've got any sense at all."

"I haven't, you know," she said woefully.

"That isn't what Nicola told me——"

"What did she tell you? Aubrey—why did you say I'd been mischief-making? I hadn't said anything—I——"

"Oh, to hell with that," he said imperiously. "I was in no state to be polite—in fact, I was a heel, and I do apologise."

"Oh, no—I do see now, and I'm glad. I don't mean glad you apologise—I mean, I didn't know you could be like that, you see."

"Like what? So thorough ; nasty?"

"So . . . human. You reminded me a bit of Terry."

He turned to look pensively at her. "You were frightened, weren't you?"

"At first. Not when I thought of Terry, though."

"Well, bless Terry, that's all I can say. . . . And bless you, for that matter."

"Me? I'm no use. It was funny that I happened to come along, though, wasn't it."

"I'm glad you did," he said, rather remotely. Annabel, growing shy again, drew away from him. "I hope I haven't said all the wrong things . . ." she murmured. "And I'm sorry I told you all my troubles—except that

you *are* such a help. . . . I don't think I could have told anybody else all about it like that, you know—even Mummy." She pondered this for a moment and then added urgently: "Aubrey, please don't tell anybody—will you?"

"Certainly I shan't."

"Thank you. . . . It isn't that I want to have secrets from people—I don't like that—only, I do want to think for myself."

"Yes . . . but don't overdo it; by which I mean, don't just brood."

"I'll try not to. But anyway, it wouldn't be fair to Terry to discuss him with people. . . . It's only *my* mind that he's on."

"At the moment. That's what I meant; I should certainly interfere if I saw you pining away with your hidden grief——"

"Oh, I shouldn't do that. That only happens in Victorian novels, and that was because they were laced too tight half the time, wasn't it? Or was that fainting?"

"Was what fainting?" echoed Aubrey, baffled.

"The heroines, I mean."

"Oh. No, I admit you may not much resemble a Victorian heroine, but all the same . . ." He surveyed her critically for a moment; returning his survey, she said impulsively:

"I think an elder brother must be a specially useful thing to have."

"I wonder if you're still likely to have me as one," he said, with grim recollection.

"Oh, yes, Aubrey—you must."

"That's not entirely up to me, is it?"

"Well, I don't know—I shouldn't be surprised. I think you ought to go and——" She checked herself and amended more meekly: "I'm sure Nico would want you to go back and explain. . . . What were you going to do?"

Supposing I hadn't happened to turn up? What were you doing here?"

He laughed suddenly, throwing back his head. "I was brooding, just as I've been telling you not to . . . I had no idea what I was going to do; I should probably have hung about here all night——"

At the same moment they realised that they had been hanging about here for a considerable time as it was. They eyed each other in quick alarm; Annabel shivered, glancing along the pavement, and Aubrey consulted his watch:

"My dear girl—it's quarter-past ten! Have you got to go to school in the morning?"

"Yes—have you had any dinner tonight?"

"No, and nor have you——"

"And," she cried frantically, "where on earth will they think I am? I do hope they think I'm still at Elizabeth's—but what if they've rung up——"

"Come on; home at once."

"Yes—come on . . ." For a second, he hesitated; but she urged:

"I'll have to explain that I've been with you, because then they won't be worried, but if I tell Nico that, she might think you were trying . . . make her jealous or——"

"That'll do; none of that woman's-magazine stuff," he returned fiercely. "I'd better see you in, anyway," he added more mildly, as they crossed the road.

It seemed incredible to Annabel that they had been, all this time, within a few yards of the house. As they approached it she noticed that none of the upstairs windows was lit; this seemed vaguely ominous. She began to feel cold, tired, and rather ashamed of herself. Aubrey was silent. As she had her foot on the lowest step, the light above the front door was unexpectedly switched on. She and Aubrey halted, disconcerted for an instant, as the front door opened.

Nicola appeared on the top step, wearing her coat, a scarf tied round her head. Catching sight of Annabel, she stopped and burst out:

"Annabel—where on *earth*'ve you b——"

Her voice died as she saw Aubrey; she stood breathless, staring at him with dilated eyes, her lips parted; she looked just as she had on that November evening in the bathroom doorway when she heard his ring at the doorbell. Kitty, coming out from the hall, peered over the stricken Nicola's shoulder and took up the tale without pause:

"Here we've been ringing up everybody we could think of, and Mummy half off her head with worry, and Nicola just going to walk over to the Bak^{ers}' to see if you were there because their phone seems to be out of order, and Daddy was going to try the police-station next——"

"I'm awfully sorry—I didn't think," said Annabel, in a small voice. She stood, tweaking undecidedly at her gloves, face to face with Nicola, but staring beyond her at Kitty, as Nicola was still staring beyond Annabel at Aubrey.

"I should say you didn't think," hectored Kitty, too relieved even to be pleased to see her. She swung round to call: "Here she is—and Mr Aubrey with her——"

The mention of Aubrey's name roused him; he propelled Annabel up the steps, without taking his eyes off Nicola. Annabel looked into the house, blinking a little against the light, and saw blank white faces turned towards her—Mummy in the middle of the hall, Daddy beside the telephone, and Philippa hanging over the banisters in her dressing-gown. Edging round Nicola, following Kitty, Annabel moved forward through the doorway towards Mummy, saying anxiously:

"I was all right. . . . I was with Aubrey. . . ."

Daddy started to say something, but glanced past her, letting his voice trail off; Mummy and Philippa were gazing out of the door too, and Annabel and Kitty turned

automatically to follow their eyes. Nicola and Aubrey were still standing oblivious, as if rooted to the step against the darkness. Then as Nicola slowly raised both her hands, Kitty, with a promptness that might have indicated either tact or exasperation, slammed the door on the pair of them.

The lock was faulty, and the door swung open again just as Aubrey lifted Nicola off her feet and bent his face down against hers.

Noel cleared his throat. "Now look here, Annabel . . ." he began briskly.

THE END

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